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THE SORCERESS.

W. G. Thompson

THE SORCERESS.

A Novel.

BY

MRS. OLIPHANT,

AUTHOR OF

"THE CHRONICLES OF CARLINGFORD,"

"THE CUCKOO IN THE NEST,"

ETC., ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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THE SORCERESS.



CHAPTER I.

WHEN Charlie Kingsward fled from Oxford, half mad with disappointment and misery, he had no idea or intention about the future left in his mind. He had come to one of those strange passes in life beyond which the imagination does not go. He had been rejected with that deepest contumely which takes the aspect of the sweetest kindness, when a woman affects the most innocent suspicion at the climax to which, consciously or unconsciously, she has been working up.

“Oh, my poor boy, was that what you were thinking of?” There is no way in which a blow can be administered with such sharp and keen effect. It made the young man’s brain, which was only an ordinary brain, and for some time had exercised but small restraining power upon him in the hurry and sweep of his feelings, reel. When he pulled the door upon him of those gardens of Aminda, that fool’s paradise in which he had been wasting his youth, and which were represented in his case by a very ordinary suburban garden in that part of Oxford called the Parks, his rejected and disappointed passion had every possible auxiliary emotion to make it unbearable. Keen mortification, humiliation, the sharp sense of being mocked and deceived; the sudden conviction of having given what seemed to the half-maddened boy his whole life, for nothing whipped him like the lashes of the Furies. In most of the crises of life the thought what to do next occurs with almost the rapidity of lightning after a great catastrophe, but Charlie felt as if there was nothing beyond. The whole world had crumbled about him. There

was no next step ; his very fooling had failed him. He rushed back to his rooms by instinct, as a wounded creature would rush to its lair, but on his way was met by eager groups returning from the "Schools," in which he ought to have been, discussing among each other the stiffness of the papers, and how they had been done. This would scarcely add to his pain, but it added to that sickening effort of absolute failure of the demolition of everything around and before him, which was what he felt the most. They made the impossible more impossible still, and cut off every retreat. When he stood in his room, amid all the useless books which he had not opened for days or weeks, and heard the others mounting the staircase outside his locked door, it seemed to the unhappy young man as though the floor under his feet was the last spot on which standing ground was possible, and that beyond and around there was nothing but chaos. For what reason and on what impulse he rushed to London it would be difficult to tell. He had little money, few friends—or rather none who were not also the friends of his family—no idea or intention of doing anything.

“Perhaps the world will end to-night.”

He did not even think so much as that, though perhaps it was in some sort the feeling in his mind. Yet no suggestions of suicide, or of anything that constitutes a moral suicide, occurred to him. These would have been something definite, they would have provided for a future, but Charlie was stupefied and had none. He had not so much sense of any resource as consisted in a pistol or a plunge into the river. He flung himself into the train and went to London, because after a time the sound of his comrades, or of those who ought to have been his comrades, became intolerable to him. They kept pacing, rushing up and down the staircase, calling to each other. One or two, indeed, talked at his own closed door, driving him into a silent frenzy. As soon as they were gone he seized a travelling bag, thrust something, he did not know what, into it, and fled—to the desert—to London, where he would be lost and no one would drive him frantic by calling to him, by making believe that there was something left in life.

It occurred to him somehow, by force of that secondary consciousness which works for us when our minds are past all exertion, to fling himself into the corner of a third-class carriage as the place where he was least likely to meet anyone he knew, though indeed the precaution was scarcely necessary, since he could not have recognised anyone, as he sat huddled up in his corner, staring blankly at the landscape that flew past the window and seeing nothing. When he arrived in the midst of the din and bustle of the great railway station, he fled once more through the crowd into the greater crowd outside, clutching instinctively at the bag which lay beside him, but seeing no one, nor whither he went nor where he was going. He walked fast, and in a fierce unconsciousness pushing his way through everything, and though he had in reality no aim, took instinctively the way to his father's house—his home—though it was at that time no home for him, being occupied by strangers. When he got into the park a vague recollection of this penetrated through the maze in which he was enveloped, and for a moment he paused, but

then went on walking at the same pace, making the circuit of the park which lay before him in the mists of the afternoon, the frosty sun setting, the hay taking a rosy tint. He went all round the silences of the half-deserted walks, beginning to feel vaguely the strange desolate sentiment of not knowing where to go, though only in the secondary phase of his consciousness. Until all at once his strength seemed to fail him, his limbs grew feeble, his steps slow, and he stopped short, mechanically, as he had walked, not knowing why, and flung himself upon a bench, where he sat long, motionless, as if that had now become the only thing solid in the world and there was no step remaining to him beyond.

A young man, though he may have numberless friends, may yet make a despairing transit like this from one place to another through the midst of a crowd without being seen by anyone who knows him ; if the encounters, of life are wonderful, the failures to encounter, the manner in which we walk alone with friends on all hands, and in our desperate moments, when help is most

necessary, do not meet or come within sight of any, is equally wonderful. The Kingswards had a large circle of acquaintance, and Charlie himself had the numberless intimates of a public school boy, a young university man, acquainted with half the youth of his period—yet nobody saw him, except one to whom he would scarcely have accorded a salutation in ordinary circumstances. Aubrey Leigh, who had been so strangely and closely connected for a moment with the Kingsward family, and then so swiftly and peremptorily cut off, arrived in London from a short visit to a suburban house by the same train which brought Charlie, and caught sight of him as he jumped out of his compartment with his bag in his hand. A very cool, self-possessed, and trim young man young Kingsward had always appeared to the other, with whose brightest and at the same time most painful recollections his figure was so connected. To see him now suddenly, with that air of desperation which had triumphed over all his natural habits and laws, that abstracted look, clutching his bag, half leaping, half stumbling out of the carriage, going off at a swift,

unconscious pace, pushing through every crowd, filled Aubrey with surprise which soon turned into anxiety. Charlie Kingsward, with a bag in his hand, rushing through the London streets conveyed an entirely new idea to the minds of the spectators. What such an arrival would have meant in ordinary circumstances would have been the rattling up of a hansom, the careless calling out of an address, the noisy progress over the stones, of the driver expectant of something more than his fare, and keenly cognisant of the habits of the young gentlemen from Oxford.

Aubrey quickened his own pace to follow the other, whose arrival this time was in such different guise. A sudden terror seized his mind, naturally quite unjustified by the outward circumstances. Was anyone ill?—which meant, was Bee ill? Had anything dreadful happened? A moment's reflection would have shown that in such a case the hansom would be more needed than usual, as conveying her brother the more quickly to his home. But Aubrey did not pause on probabilities. A moment more would have

made him sure of the unlikelihood that Charlie would be sent for in case of Bee's illness, unless, indeed, the question had been one of life and death.

But he had not even heard of his love for many months. His heart was hungry for news of her, and in that case he would have done his best to intercept Charlie, to extract from him, if possible, some news of his sister. He followed, accordingly, with something of the same headlong haste with which Charlie was pushing through the streets, and for a long time, up to the gates of the park, indeed, kept him in sight. At the rate at which the young man was going it was impossible to do more.

Then Aubrey suddenly lost sight of the figure he was pursuing. There was a group of people collected for some vulgar, unsupportable object or other at that point, and it was there that Charlie deflected from the straight road for home, which he had hitherto taken, and which his pursuer took it for granted he would follow for the rest of the way. When Aubrey had pushed his way through the little crowd Charlie was no

longer visible. He looked to left and to right in vain, scrutinised the short cut over the park, and the broad road full of passing carriages and wayfarers, but saw no trace of the figure he sought. Aubrey then walked quickly to the point where Charlie, as he supposed, must be going, and soon came to the gate on the other side and the street itself in which the house of the Kingswards was. But he saw no sign of Charlie, nor of anyone looking for him. He himself had no acquaintance with that house, to which he had never been admitted, but he had passed it many times in the vain hope of seeing Bee at a window, not knowing that it was occupied by strangers. While he walked down the street, however, anxiously gazing to see if there were any signs of illness, asking himself whether he dared to inquire at the door, he saw a gentleman come up and enter with a latch key, who certainly did not belong to the Kingsward family. This changed the whole current of Aubrey's thoughts. It was not here then that Charlie was coming. His rapid and wild walk could not mean any disaster to the family—any trouble to Bee.

The discovery was at once a disappointment and a relief ; a relief from the anxiety which had gradually been gaining upon him, a disappointment of the hope of hearing something of her. For if Charlie was not going home, who could trace out where such a young man might be going ? To the dogs, Aubrey thought, instinctively ; to the devil, to judge by his looks. Yet Charlie Kingsward, the most correct of modern young men, had surely in him no natural proclivity towards that facile descent. What could it be that had driven him along like a leaf before the wind ?

Aubrey was himself greatly disturbed and stirred up by this encounter. He had schooled himself to quiet, and the pangs of his overthrow, though not quenched, had been kept under with a strong hand. The life which he desired for himself, which he had so fully planned, so warmly hoped for, had been broken to pieces and made an end of, leaving the way he had chosen blank to him, as he thought, for evermore. He had been very unfortunate in that way, his early venture ending in bitter disappointment ; his

other, more wise, more sweet, cut off before it had ever been. But he was a reasonable being, and knew that life had to be put to other uses, even when that sole fair path which the heart desired was closed. He had given it up definitely, neither thinking nor hoping again for the household life, the patriarchal existence among his own fields, his own people, under his own roof, and was now doing his best to conform his life to a more grey and monotonous standard.

But the sight of Charlie, or rather the sight of Bee's brother, evidently under the influence of some strong feeling, and utterly carried away by it so as to ignore all that regard for appearance and decorum which had been his leading principle, came suddenly like a touch upon a wound, reviving all the questions and impatiences of the past. Aubrey felt that he could not endure the ignorance of her and all her ways which had fallen over him like a pall, cutting off her being from him as if they were not still living in the same world, still within reach of each other. He might endure, he said to himself, to be parted from her, to give up

hope of her, since she willed it so—yet, at least, he must know something of her, find out if she were ill or well, what she was doing, where she was even; for that mere outside detail he did not know. How was it possible he should bear this—not even to know where she was? This thought took hold of him, and drove him into a fever of sudden feeling. Oh! yes; he had resigned himself to live without her, to endure his solitary existence far from her, since she willed it so; but not even to know where she was, how she was, what she was doing!

Suddenly, in a moment, the fiery stinging came back, the sword plunged into the wound. He had not for a moment deluded himself with the idea that he was cured of it, but yet it had been subdued by necessity, by the very silence which now he felt to be intolerable. He went back into the park, where the long lines of the misty paths were now almost deserted, gleams of the lamps outside shining through the dark tracery of the branches, and all quiet except in the broad road, still sounding with a diminished

stream of carriages. He dived into the intersections of the deserted paths, something as Charlie had done, seeking instinctively a silent place where he could be alone with the newly-aroused torment of his thoughts.

When he came suddenly upon the bench upon which Charlie had flung himself, his first movement was to turn back. He had been walking over the grass, and his steps were consequently noiseless, and he was in the mood to which any human presence—the possible encounter of anyone who might speak to him and disturb his own hurrying passions—was intolerable. But as he turned, his eye fell on the bag—the dusty, half-empty thing still clutched by a hand that seemed more or less unconscious. This insignificant detail arrested Aubrey. He moved a little way, keeping on the grass, to get a fuller view of the half-reclining figure. And then he made out in the partial light that it was the same figure which he had pursued so long.

What was Charlie doing here in this secluded spot—he, the most unlike any such retirement, the well-equipped, confident,

prosperous young man of the world, subject to so few delusions, knowing his way so well, both in the outer and the inner world?

Aubrey was more startled than tongue can tell. He thought no longer of family disaster, of illness, or trouble. Whatever was amiss, it was evidently Charlie who was the sufferer. He paused for a minute or more, reflecting what he should do. Then he stepped forward upon the gravel, and sitting down, put his hand suddenly upon that which held the half-filled bag.

“Kingsward!” he said.

CHAPTER II.

MEANWHILE Colonel Kingsward had remained in Oxford. It was necessary that he should regulate all Charlie's affairs, find out and pay what bills he had left, and formally sever his connection with the University. It is a thing which many fathers have had to do, with pain and sorrow, and a sense of premature failure, which is one of the bitterest things in life ; but Colonel Kingsward had not this painful feeling to aggravate the annoyance and vexation which he actually felt. The fact that his son had been idle in the way of books, and was leaving Oxford without taking his degree, did not affect his mind much. Many young fellows did that, especially in the portion of the world to which Charlie belonged. The Colonel was irritated by

having to interfere, by the trouble he was having, and the deviation from salutary routine, but he felt no humiliation either for himself or his son. And Charlie's liabilities were not large, so far as he could discover. The fellow, at least, had no vices, he said to himself. Even the unsympathetic Don had nothing to say against him but that charge of idleness, which the Colonel rather liked than otherwise. Had he been able to say that it was his son's social or even athletic successes which were the causes of the idleness he would have liked it altogether. He paid Charlie's bills with a compensating consciousness that these were the last that would have to be paid at Oxford, and he was not even sorry that he could not get back to town by the last train. Indeed, I think he could have managed that very well had he tried. He remained for the second night with wonderful equanimity, finding, as a matter of course, a man he knew in the hotel, and dining not unpleasantly that day. Before he went back to town, he thought it only civil to go out to the Parks to return, as politeness demanded, the visit of the lady

who had so kindly and courageously gone to see him, and from whom he had received the only explanation of Charlie's strange behaviour. He went forth as soon as he had eaten an early luncheon, in order to be sure to find Miss Lance before she went out, and stopped only to throw a rapid glance in passing at a band of young ruffians—mud up to their eyes, and quite undistinguishable for the elegant undergraduates which some of them were—who were playing football in the Parks. The Colonel had, like most men, a warm interest in athletic sports, but his soldierly instincts disliked the mud. Miss Lance's house was beyond that much broken up and down-trampled green. It was a house in a garden of the order brought into fashion by the late Randolph Caldecott, red with white "fixings" and pointed roof, and it bore triumphantly upon its little gate post the name of Wensleydale, Oxford Dons, and the inhabitants of that district generally, being fond of such extension titles. Colonel Kingsward unconsciously drew himself together, settled his head into his collar, and twisted his moustache, as he knocked at the door,

and yet it was not an imposing door. It was opened, not by a solemn butler, but by a neat maid, who showed Colonel Kingsward into a trim drawing-room, very feminine and full of flowers and knick-knacks. Here he waited full five minutes before anyone appeared, looking about him with much curiosity, examining the little stands of books, the work-tables, the writing-tables, the corners for conversation. It was not a large room, and yet space had been found for two little centres of social intercourse. There were, therefore, the Colonel divined, two ladies who shared this abode. Colonel Kingsward had never been what is called a ladies' man. The feminine element in life had been supplied to him in that subdued way naturally exhibited by a yielding and gentle wife in a house where the husband is supreme. He was quite unacquainted with it in its unalloyed state, and the spectacle amused and pleasantly affected him with a sense at once of superiority and of novelty. It was pleasant to see how these little known creatures arranged themselves in their own private dominion, where they had every-

thing their own way, and the touch of the artificial which appeared in all these dainty particulars seemed appropriate and commended itself agreeably to the man who was accustomed to a broader and larger style of household economy. A man likes to see the difference well marked, at least a man who holds Colonel Kingsward's ideas of life. He had gone so far as to note the "Laura" with a large and flowing "L" on the notepaper, which "L" was repeated on various pretty articles about. When the door opened and Miss Lance appeared, she came up to him holding out both her hands as to an old friend.

"Will you forgive me for keeping you waiting, Colonel Kingsward? The fact is we have just come in, and you know that a woman has always a toilette to make, not like you lucky people who put on or put off a hat and all is done."

"I did not think you were likely to be out so early," the Colonel said.

"My friend has a son at Oriel," replied Miss Lance. "He is a great football player as it happens, and we are bound to be present

when he is playing ; besides, the Parks are so near."

"I did not think it was a game that would interest you."

"It does not, except in so far that I am interested in everything that interests my surroundings. My friend goes into it with enthusiasm ; she even believes that she understands what it is all about."

"It seems chiefly mud that is about," said the Colonel, with a slight tone of disapproval, for it displeased him to think that a woman like this should go to a football match, and also it displeased him after his private amusement and reflections on the feminine character of the house to find, after all, a man connected with it, even if that man were only a boy.

"Come," said Miss Lance, indicating a certain chair, "sit down here by me, Colonel Kingsward, and let us not talk commonplaces any longer. You have been obliged to stay longer than you intended. I had been thinking of you as in London to-day."

"It was very kind to think of me at all."

"Oh, don't say so—that is one of the

commonplaces too. Of course, I have been thinking of you with a great deal of interest, and with some rather rebellious, undutiful sort of thoughts."

"What thoughts?" cried the Colonel, in surprise.

"Well," she said, "it is a great blessing, no doubt, to have children—to women, perhaps, an unalloyed blessing; and yet, you know, an unattached person like myself cannot help a grudge occasionally. Here are you, for instance, in the prime of life; your thoughts about everything matured, your reason more important to the world than any of the escapades of youth, and yet you are depleted from your own grave path in life; your mind occupied, your thoughts distracted; really your use to your country interrupted by—by what are called the cares of a family," she concluded, with a short laugh.

She spoke with much use of her hands in graceful movement that could scarcely be called gesticulation—clasping them together, spreading them out, making them emphasise everything. And they were very white and pretty hands, with a diamond on one, which

sparkled at appropriate moments, and added its special emphasis too.

The Colonel was flattered with this description of himself and his capacities.

"There is great truth," he said, "in what you say. I have felt it, but for a father at the head of a family to put forth such sentiments would shock many good people."

"Fortunately there are no good people here, and if there were I might still express them freely. It is a thing that strikes me every day. In feeble specimens it destroys the individuality; in strong characters like yourself——"

"You do me too much honour, Miss Lance. My position, you are aware, is doubly unfortunate, for I have all upon my shoulders. Still, one must do one's duty at whatever cost."

"That would be your feeling, of course," said Miss Lance, with a sort of admiring and regretful expression. "For my part, I am the most dreadful rebel. I kick against duty. I think a man has a duty to himself. To stint a noble human being for the sake of nourishing some half-dozen secondary ones,

is to me—— Oh, don't let us talk of it! Tell me, dear Colonel Kingsward, have you got everything satisfactorily settled, and heard of the arrival——? Oh," she cried, clasping those white hands, "how can I sit here calmly and ask, seeing that I have a share in causing all this trouble—though, heaven knows, how unintentionally on my part!"

"Don't say so," said the Colonel, putting his hands for a second on those clasped white hands. "I am sure that you can have done nothing but good to my foolish boy. To be admitted here at all was too much honour."

"I shall never be able to take an interest in anyone again," she said, drooping her head. "It is so strange, so strange to have one's motives misunderstood, but you don't do so. I am so thankful I had the courage to go to you. My friend dissuaded me strongly from taking such a step. She said that a parent would naturally blame anyone rather than his own son——"

"My dear Miss Lance, who could blame you? I don't know," said the Colonel, "that

I blame poor Charlie so much either. To be much in your company might well be dangerous for any man."

"You must not speak so—indeed, indeed, you must not! I feel more and more ashamed! When a woman comes to a certain age—and has no children of her own. Surely, surely——"

"Come!" he cried. "You said a parent's cares destroyed one's individuality——"

"Not with a woman. What individuality has a woman? The only use of her is to sink that pride in a better—the pride of being of some use. What I regretted was for you—and such as you—if there are enough of such to make a class—. Yes, yes," she added, looking up, "I acknowledge the inconsistency. I have not sense enough to see the pity of it in all cases—but my real principle, my deep belief is that to draw a man like you away from your career, to trouble and distress you about others, who are not of half your value—is a thing that ought to be prevented by Act of Parliament," she cried, breaking off with a laugh. "But you have not told me yet how everything has finished,"

she added, in a confidential low tone, after a pause.

Then he told her in some detail what he had done. It was delightful to tell her, a woman so sympathising, so quick to understand, with that approving, consoling, remonstrating action of her white hands which seemed at the same moment to applaud and deprecate, with a constant inference that he was too good, that really he ought not to be so good. She laughed at his description of the Don, adding a graphic touch or two to make the picture more perfect—till Colonel Kingsward was surprised at himself to think how cleverly he had done it, and was delighted with his own success. This gave a slightly comic character to his other sketches of poor Charlie's tradesmen, and scout, and an unutterable cad of a young fellow who had met the Colonel leaving the college and had told him of a small sum which Charlie owed him.

"The little beast!" the Colonel said.

"Worse!" cried Miss Lance, "I would not slander any gentlemanly dog by calling him of the same species."

Altogether, her interest and sympathy changed this not particularly lively occasion

into one of the brightest moments of Colonel Kingsward's life. He had not been used to a woman so clever, who took him up at half a word, and enhanced the interest of everything. Had he been asked, indeed, he would have said that he did not like clever women. But then Miss Lance had other qualities. She was very handsome, and she had an evident and undisguised admiration for him. She was so very frank and sure of her position as a woman of a certain age—a qualification which she appropriated to herself constantly, though most women thought it an insult—that she did not find it needful to conceal that admiration. When he thanked her for her kindness for the patient hearing of all his story, and the interest she had shown, to which he had so little claim, Miss Lance smiled and held out those white hands.

“I assure you,” she said, “the benefit is all on my side. Living here among very young men, you must think what it is to talk to, to be treated confidentially, by a man like yourself. It is like a glance into another life.” She sighed, and added, “The young are delightful. I am very fond of young

people. Still, to meet now and then with someone of one's own age, of one's own species, if I may say so—"

"You do me too much honour," said Colonel Kingsward, feeling with a curious elation, how superior he was. She went with him to the garden gate, not afraid of the wintry air, showing no sense of the chill, and though she had given him her hand before, offered it again with the sweetest friendliness.

"And you promised," she said, looking in his face while he held it, "that you would send me one line when you got home, to tell me how you find him—and that all is well—and forgiven."

"I shall be too happy to be permitted to write," Colonel Kingsward said.

"Forgiven," she said, "and forgotten!" holding up a finger of the other hand, the hand with the diamond. She stood for a moment watching while he closed the low gate, and then, waving her hand to him, turned away. Colonel Kingsward had never been a finer fellow, in his own estimation, than when he walked slowly off from that closed door.

CHAPTER III.

I WILL not repeat the often described scene of anxiety which existed in Kingswarden for some time after. Colonel Kingsward returned, as Bee had done, to find that nothing had been seen or heard of Charlie, whom both had expected to find defiant and wretched at home. It is astonishing how quickly in such circumstances the tables are turned, and the young culprit—whom parents and friends have been ready to crush the moment he appears with well-deserved rebuke—becomes, when he does not appear, the object of the most eager appeals ; forgiveness, and advantages of every kind all ready to greet him if only he will come back. The girls were frightened beyond description by their

brother's disappearance, and conjured up every dreadful image of disaster and misery. They thought of Charlie in his despair going off to the ends of the earth and never being seen more. They thought of him as in some wretched condition on shipboard, sick and miserable, reduced to dreadful work and still more dreadful privations, he who had lain in the lilies and fed on the roses of life. They thought of him, Colonel Kingsward's son, enlisted as a private soldier, in a crowded barrack-room. They thought of him wandering about the street, cold, perhaps hungry, without a shelter. The most dreadful images came before their inexperienced eyes. The old aunt who was their companion told them dreadful stories of family prodigals who disappeared and were never heard of again, and terror took hold of the girls' minds.

Their constant walk was to the station, with the idea that he might perhaps come as far as the village, and that there his heart might fail him. Except for that melancholy indulgence, they would not be out of the house at any time together, lest at that moment Charlie might arrive, and no one be

there to welcome him. There was always one who ran to the door at every sound, scandalising the servant, who could never get there so fast but one of the young ladies was before him. They had endless conversations and consultations on the subject, forming a hundred plans as to how they should go forth into the world to seek for him, all rendered abortive by the reflection that they knew not where to go. Bee and Betty were very unhappy during these lingering, chilly days of early spring. The tranquillity of the family life seemed to be destroyed in a moment. Where was Charlie? Was there any news of Charlie? This was the question that filled their minds day and night.

Colonel Kingsward was not less affectionate, but he was more practical and experienced. He knew that now and then it does happen that a young man disappears, sinks under the stream, and goes, as people say, to the dogs, and is heard of no more—or, at least, only in a shipwrecked condition, the shame and trouble of his friends. It did not seem to him, at first, that there could be any such danger for his son. He anticipated

nothing more than a few days' sullenness, perhaps in some friend's house, who would make cautious overtures and intercede for the rebellious but shame-stricken boy. When, however, the time passed on, and a longer interval than any judicious friend would permit had elapsed, a deep anxiety arose also in Colonel Kingsward's mind. The *esclandre* of an Oxford failure did not trouble him much, but, in view of Charlie's future career, he could not employ detectives, or advertise in the papers, or take any steps which might lead to a paragraph as to the anxiety of a distinguished family on account of a son who had disappeared. Colonel Kingsward might not be a very tender parent, but he was fully alive to the advantage of his children, and would allow no stigma to be attached to them which he could prevent. He went a great deal about London in these days, going into many a spot where a man of his dignity was out of place, with an anxious and troubled eye upon the crowds of young men, the familiars of these confused regions, among whom, however, no trace was to be found of his son.

Nobody ever knew how much the Colonel undertook, in how many strange scenes he found himself, or half of what he really did to recover Charlie, and save him from the consequences of his folly. The most devoted father could scarcely have done more, and his mind was almost as full of the prodigal as were the minds of the girls, who thought of so many grievous dangers, yet did not think of those that filled their father's mind. Colonel Kingsward went about everywhere, groping, saying not a word to betray his ignorance of Charlie's whereabouts. To those who had any right to know his family affairs, he explained that he had decided not to press Charlie to undergo any examination beyond what was necessary, that he had given up the thought of taking his degree, and was studying modern languages and international law, which were so much more likely to be useful to him. "He is a steady fellow — he has no vices," he said, "and I think it is wise to let him have his head." Colonel Kingsward was by nature a despotic man, and his friends were very glad to hear that he was, in respect to Charlie, so amiable

—they said to each other that his wife's death had softened Kingsward, and what a good thing it was that he was behaving so judiciously about his son.

A pause like this in the life of a family—a period of darkness in which the life of one of its members is suspended, interrupted, as it were, in mid career, cut off, yet not with that touch of death which stills all anxieties—is always a difficult and miserable one. Some, and the number increases of these uncontrolled persons, cry out to earth and heaven, and make the lapse public and set all the world talking of their affairs. But Colonel Kingsward sternly put down even the tears of his young daughters.

“If you cannot keep a watch over yourselves before the servants, you had better leave the house,” he said, all the more stern to them that he was soft to Charlie; but indeed it was not so much that he was soft to Charlie as that he was concerned and anxious about Charlie's career.

“Betty, I suppose, can go back to the Lyons' in Portman Square, and Bee——”

“If you think that I can go visiting, papa,

and no one with the children, and poor Charlie——”

“I think—and, indeed, I know, that you can and will do what I think best for you,” said Colonel Kingsward.

Bee looked up at him quickly and met her father's eyes. The two looked at each other suspiciously, almost fiercely. Bee saw in her father's look possibilities and dangers as yet undeveloped, mysteries which she divined and feared, yet neither could nor would have put into words, while he looked at her divining her divinations, defying unconsciously the suspicion which he could not have expressed any more than she.

“Let it be understood once for all,” he said, “that the children have their nurses and governess, and that your presence is by no means indispensable to them. You are their eldest sister, you are not the mistress of the house. Nothing will happen to the children. In considering what is best for you——”

“Papa!” cried Bee, almost fiercely; but she did not pour out upon him that bitterness which had been collecting in her heart. She paused in time; but then added, “I have not

asked you to consider what was best for me."

"That is enough to show that it is time for me to consider it," he said.

And then, once more their looks met, and clashed like the encounter of two armies. What did she suspect? What did he intend? They both breathed short, as if with the impulse of battle, but neither, even to themselves, could have answered that question. Colonel Kingsward cried "Take care, Bee!" as he went away, a by no means happy man, to his library, while she threw herself down upon a sofa, and—inevitable result in a girl of any such rising of passion—burst into tears.

"Bee," said the sensible Betty, "you ought not to speak like that to papa."

"I ought to be thankful that he has considered what was best for me, and spoilt my life!" cried Bee, through her tears. "Oh, it is very easy for you to speak. You are to go to the Lyons', where you wish to go—to be free of all anxiety—for what is Charlie to you but only your brother, and you know that you can't do him any good by making yourself miserable about him? And you will

see Gerald Lyon, who is doing well at Cambridge, and listen to all the talk about him, and smile, and not hate him for being so smug and prosperous, while poor Charlie——”

“How unjust you are!” cried Betty, growing red and then pale. “It is not Gerald Lyon’s fault that Charlie has not done well—even if I cared anything for Gerald Lyon.”

“It is you who ought to take care,” said Bee, “if papa thinks it necessary to consider what is best for you.”

“There is nothing to consider,” said Betty, with a little movement of her hands.

“But it can never be so bad for you,” said Bee, with a tone of regret. “Never! To think that my life should be ruined and all ended for the sake of a woman—a woman—who has now ruined Charlie, and whom papa—oh, papa!” she cried, with a tone indescribable of exasperation and scorn and contempt.

“What is it about papa? You look at each other, you and he, like two tigers. You have got the same dreadful eyes. Yes, they are dreadful eyes; they give out fire. I

wonder often that they don't make a noise like an explosion. And Bee, you said yourself that there was something else. You never would have given in to papa, but there was something of your own that parted you from Aubrey—for ever. You said so, Bee—when his mother——”

“Is there any need for bringing in any gentleman's name?” cried Bee, with the dignity of a dowager. And then, ignoring her own rule, she burst forth, “What I have got against him is nothing to anyone—but that Aubrey Leigh should he insulted and rejected and turned away from our door, and that my heart should be broken because of a woman whom papa and Charlie—whom papa——! He writes to her, and she writes to him—he tells her everything—he consults her about us, *us*, my mother's children! And yet it was on her account that Aubrey Leigh was turned from the door——Oh, if you think I can bear that, you must think me more than flesh and blood!” Bee cried, the tears adding to the fire and sparkle of her blazing eyes.

“It isn't very nice,” said little Betty,

sagely, "but I am not so sure that it was her fault, for if you had stuck to Aubrey as you meant to do at first, your heart would not have been broken, and if Charlie had not been very silly, a person of that age could not have done him any harm; and then papa——. What can she do to papa? I suppose he thinks as she is old he may write to her as a friend and ask her advice. There is not any harm that I can see in that."

Bee was too much agitated to make any reply to this. She resumed again, after a pause, as if Betty had not spoken: "He writes to her, and she writes to him, just as she did to Charlie, for I have seen them both—long letters, with that ridiculous "Laura," and a big L, as if she were a girl. You can see them, if you like, at breakfast, when he reads them instead of his papers, and smiles to himself when he is reading them, and looks—ridiculous"—cried Bee, in her indignation. "Ridiculous! as if he were young too; a man who is father of all of us; and not much more than a year ago—. Oh, if I were not to speak I think the very trees would, and the bushes in the shubbery! It is more than anyone can bear."

"You are making up a story," said Betty, wonderingly. "I don't know what you mean." Then she cried, carrying the war into the enemy's country, "Oh, Bee, if you had not given him up, if you had been faithful to him!—now we should have had somebody to consult with, somebody that could have gone and looked for poor Charlie ; for we are only two girls, and what can we do?"

Bee did not make any reply, but looked at her sister with startled eyes.

"Mamma was never against Aubrey Leigh," said Betty, pursuing her advantage. "She never would have wished you to give him up. And it is all your own doing, not papa's doing, or anyone's. If I had ever cared for him I never, never should have given him up ; and then we should have had as good as another brother, that could have gone into the world and hunted everywhere and brought Charlie home."

The argument was taken up at hazard, a chance arrow lying in the young combatant's way, without intention—but it went straight to its mark.

CHAPTER IV.

THE house that had been so peaceful was thus full of agitation and disturbance, the household, anxious and alarmed, turning their weapons upon each other, to relieve a little the gnawing of that suspense which they were so unaccustomed to bear. It was true what Bee's keen and sharply aroused observation had convinced her, that Colonel Kingsward was in correspondence with Miss Lance, and that her letters were very welcome to him, and read with great interest. He threw down the paper after he had made a rush through its contents, and read eagerly the long sheets of paper, upon which the great L, stamped at the head of every page, could be read on the other side of the table.

How did that woman know the days he was to be at home, that her letters should always come on those mornings and never at any other time? Bee almost forgot her troubles, those of the family in respect to Charlie, and those which were her very own, in her passionate hatred and distrust of the new correspondent to whom Colonel Kingsward, like his son, had opened his heart.

He was not, naturally, a man given to correspondence. His letters to his wife, in those days which now seemed so distant, had been models of concise writing. His opinions, or rather verdicts, upon things great and small had been conveyed in terse sentences, very much to the purpose; deliverances not of his way of thinking, but of the unalterable dogmas that were to rule the family life; and her replies, though diffuse, were always more or less regulated by her consciousness of the little time there would be given to them, and the necessity of making every explanation as brief as possible—not to worry papa, who had so much to do.

Why it was that he found the long letters,

which he read with a certain defiant pride in the presence of his daughters at the breakfast table, so agreeable, it would be difficult to tell. They were very carefully adapted to please him, it is true ; and they were what are called clever letters—such letters as clever women write, with a *faux air* of brilliancy which deceives both the writer and the recipient, making the one feel herself a Sevigné and the other a hero worthy the exercise of such powers. And there was something very novel in this sudden inroad of sentimental romance into an existence never either sentimental or romantic, which had fallen into the familiar calm of family life so long ago with a wife, who though sweet and fair enough to delight any man, had become in reality only the chief of his vassals, following every indication of his will, when not eagerly watching an opportunity of anticipating his wishes. His new friend treated the Colonel in a very different way. She expounded her views of life with all the adroitness of a mind experienced in the treatment of those philosophies which touch the questions of sex, the differences between

a man's and a woman's view, the sentiment which can be carried into the most simple subjects. There is nothing that can give more entertaining play of argument, or piquancy of intercourse, than this mode of correspondence when cleverly carried out, and Miss Laura Lance was a mistress of all its methods. It was all entirely new to Colonel Kingsward. He was as much enchanted with it as his son had been, and thought the writer as brilliant, as original, as poor Charlie had done, who had no way of knowing better. The Colonel's head, which generally had been occupied by professional or public matters—by the intrigues of the service or the incompetencies of the Department—now found a much more interesting private subject of thought. He was a man full of anxiety and annoyance at this particular crisis of his career, and his correspondent was by way of sharing his anxiety to the utmost and even blaming herself as the cause of it; yet she contrived to amuse him, to bring a smile, to touch a lighter key, to relieve the tension of his mind from time to time, without ever allowing him to feel that the chief subject of

their correspondence was out of her thoughts. He got no relief of this description at home, where the girls' anxious questions about Charlie, their eagerness to know what had been done, seemed to upbraid him with indifference, as if he were not doing everything that was possible. Miss Lance knew better the dangers that were being run, the real difficulties of the case, than these inexperienced chits of children; but she knew also that a man's mind requires relief, and that, in point of fact, the Colonel's health, strength and comfort, were of more importance than many Charlie's. This was a thing that had to be understood, not said, and the Colonel indeed was as anxious and concerned about Charlie as it was almost possible to be. He did not form dreadful pictures as Bee and Betty did of what the boy might be suffering. The boy deserved to suffer, and this consideration, had he dwelt upon it, would have afforded a certain satisfaction. But what did make him wretched was the fear of any exposure, the mention in public of anything that might injure his son's career. An opportunity was already dawning of getting

him an appointment upon which the Colonel had long kept his eye, and which would be of double importance at present as sending him out of the country and into new scenes. But of what use were all a father's careful arrangements if they were thus balked by the perversity of the boy?

Things were still in this painful suspense when Miss Lance announced to Colonel Kingsward her arrival in town. She described to him how it was that she was coming.

“My friend is absent with her son till after Easter, and I am understood to be fond of town, and am coming to spend a week or two to see the first of the season, the pictures, &c., as well as a few friends whom I still keep up, the relics of brighter and younger days—this is the reason I give, but you will easily understand, dear Colonel Kingsward, that there is another reason far more near to my heart. Your poor boy! Or may I for once say our poor boy? For you are aware that I have never ceased to upbraid myself for what has happened, and that I shall always bear a mother's heart to

Charlie, dear fellow, to whom, in wishing him nothing but good, I have been so unfortunate as to do such dreadful wrong. Every word you say about your hopes for him, and the great chance which he is so likely to miss, cuts me to the heart. And it has occurred to me that there are some places in which he may have been heard of, to which I could myself go, or where I might take you if you wished, which you would not yourself be likely to know. I wish I had thought of them before. I come up now full of hope that we may hear something and find a reliable clue. I shall be in George Street, Hanover Square, a place which is luckily in the way for everything. Please come and see me. I hope you will not think I am presuming in endeavouring to solve a difficulty for which I am, alas, alas! partially to blame. To assure me of this at least if no more, come, do come to see me to-morrow, Tuesday afternoon. I shall do nothing till I have your approval."

This letter had an exciting effect upon the Colonel, more than anything he had known for years. He held it before him, yielding

himself up to this pleasurable sensation for some minutes after he had read it. The Easter recess had left London empty, and he had been deprived of some of the ordinary social solaces which, though they increased the difficulty of keeping his son's disappearance a secret, still broke the blank of his suspense and made existence possible. Hard to bear was the point blank shock which he had sometimes received, as when an indiscreet but influential friend suddenly burst upon him, "I don't see your son's name in the Oxford lists, Kingsward." "No," the Colonel had replied, with a countenance from which all expression had been dismissed, "we thought it better that he should keep to his special studies." "Quite right, quite right," answered that great official, for what is a mere degree to F. O.? Even to have such things as this said to him, with the chance of putting in a response, was better than the stagnation, in which a man is so apt to feel that all kinds of whispers are circulating in respect to the one matter which it is his interest to conceal.

And his heart, though it was a middle-

aged, and no longer nimble organ given to leaping, jumped up in his breast when he read his letter. There was the possible clue which it was good to hear of—and there was the listener to whom he could tell everything, who took such an entire and flattering share in his anxieties, with whom there was no need to invent excuses, or to conceal anything. Perhaps there were other reasons, too, which he did not put into words. The image which had dazzled him at Oxford rose again before his eyes. It was an image which had already often visited him. One of the handsomest women he had ever seen, and so flattering, so confidential, so deeply impressed by himself, so candid and anxious to blame herself, to place herself in his hands. He went back to town with agreeable instead of painful anticipations. To share one's cares is always an alleviation—to be able openly to take a friend's advice. The girls, to whom alone he could be perfectly open on this matter, were such little fools that he had ceased to discuss it with them, if, indeed, he had ever discussed it. And to nobody else could he speak on the subject at all. The

opportunity of pouring forth all his speculations and alarms, of hearing the suggestions of another mind—and such a mind as hers—of finding a new clue, was balm to his angry, annoyed and excited spirit. There were other *douceurs* involved, which were not absent from his thoughts. The pleasure of the woman's society, who was so flatteringly pleased with his, her mature beauty, which had so much attraction in it, the look of her eyes, which said more than words, the touch—laid upon his for a moment with so much eloquent expression, appeal, sympathy, consolation, provocation—of her beautiful hands. All this was in the Colonel's mind. He had scarcely known what was the touch of a woman's hand, at least in this way, during the course of his long, calm domestic life. He had been very fond of his wife, of course, and very tender, as well as he knew how, during her illness, though entirely unconscious of how much he demanded from her even in the course of that illness. But this was utterly different, apart from everything he had ever known. Friendship—that friendship between man

and woman which has been the subject of so much sentimental controversy. Somebody whom Miss Lance had quoted to him, some great man in Oxford, had said it was the only real friendship ; many others, amongst whom Colonel Kingsward himself had figured when at any moment so ridiculous an argument had crossed his path, denounced it as a mere unfounded fiction to conceal other sentiments. Dolts ! It was the Oxford great man who was in the right of it. The only friendship ! —with sweetness in it which no man could give, a more entire confidence, a more complete sympathy. He knew that he could say things to Laura—Miss Lance—which he could say to no man, and that a look from her eyes would do more to strengthen him than oceans of kind words from lips which would address him as “old fellow.” He had her image before him all the time as he went up in the train ; it went with him into the decorous dulness of his office, and when he left his work an hour earlier than usual his steps were as light as a young man’s. He had not felt so much exhilaration of spirit since — — ;

but he could scarcely go back to a date on which his bosom's lord had sat so lightly on his throne. Truth to tell, Colonel Kingsward had fallen on evil days. Even the course of his ordinary existence, when he had gone through life with his pretty wife by his side, dining out constantly, going everywhere, though enjoyable in its way, and with the satisfaction of keeping up to the right mark, had not been exciting. She no doubt told for a great deal in his happiness, but there were no risks, no excitements, and not as much as the smart of an occasional quarrel between them. He had known what to expect of her in every emergency ; there was nothing novel to be looked for, no unaccustomed flavour in anything she was likely to do or say. He did not make this comparison consciously, for indeed there was no comparison at all between his late wife (he called her so already in his mind) and Miss Lance—not the slightest comparison ! The latter was a far more piquant thing—a friend—and the most delightful friend, surely, that ever man had !

He found her in a little drawing-room on

the first floor of what looked very much like an ordinary London lodging-house ; but within it had changed its character completely, and had become, though in a different, more subtle way than that of the drawing-room in Oxford, the bower of Laura, a special habitation marked with her very name, like the notepaper on her table. He could not for the first moment avoid a bewildering idea that it was the same room in which he had seen her in Oxford transported thither. There seemed the same pictures on the walls, the same writing-table, or at least one arranged in precisely the same way, the same chairs placed two together for conversation. What a wonderful creature she was, thus to put the stamp of her own being upon everything she touched. Once more he had to wait for a minute or two before she came, but she made no apology for her delay. She came in with her hand extended, with an air of sympathy yet satisfaction at the sight of him which went to Colonel Kingsward's heart. If she had been sorry only it would have displeased him, as showing a mind occupied wholly with Charlie,

but the delicate mingling of pleasure with concern was exactly what the Colonel felt to be most fit.

"I am so glad to see you," she said. "How kind of you to come so soon, to pay such prompt attention to my wish."

"Considering that it was my own wish," he said, "and what I desired most, I should say how good of you to come, but I can't venture to hope that it was entirely for me."

"It was very much for you, Colonel Kingsward. You know what blame I take to myself for all that has happened. And I think, perhaps, I may have it in my power to make some inquiries that would not suggest themselves. But we must talk of this after. In the meantime, I can't but think first of you. What an ordeal for you—what weary work! But what a pull over us you men have! You keep your great spirit and command over yourself through everything, while, whatever little trouble we may have, it shows immediately. Oh," said Miss Lance, clasping her hands, "a calm strong man is a sight which it elevates one only to see."

"You give me far too much credit. One

is obliged to keep a good face to the world. I don't approve of people who wash their dirty linen in public."

"Don't try to make yourself little with all this commonplace reasoning. You need not explain yourself to me, dear Colonel Kingsward. I flatter myself that I have the gift of understanding, if nothing else."

"A great many things else," he said; "and indeed my keeping up in this emergency has been greatly helped by your great friendship and moral support. I don't know what you have done to this room," he added, changing the theme quickly, "did you bring it with you? It is not a mere room in London—it is your room. I should have known it among a thousand."

"What a delightful compliment," she said. "I am so glad you think so, for it is one of the things I pride myself on. I think I can always make even a lodging-house look a bit like home."

"It looks like you," he repeated. "I don't notice such matters much, but no one could help seeing. And I hope you are to be here for some time, and that if I can be of any use—"

“ Oh ! Colonel Kingsward, don't hold out such flattering hopes. You of use ! Of course, to a lone woman in town you would be far more than of use—you would simply be a tower of strength. But I do not come here to make use of you. I come—”

“ You could not give me greater pleasure than by making use of me. I am not going much into society, my house is not open—my girls are too young to take the responsibilities of a season upon themselves ; but anything that a single individual can do to be of service—”

“ Your dear girls—how I should like to see them, to be able to take them about a little, to make up to those poor children as far as a stranger could ! But I can scarcely hope that you would trust them to me after the trouble I have helped to bring on you all. Dear Colonel Kingsward, your chivalrous offer will make all the difference in my life. If you will give me your arm sometimes, on a rare occasion—”

“ As often as you please — and the oftener the more it will please me,” he cried, in tones full of warmth and eagerness. Miss

Lance raised her grateful eyes to him full of unspeakable things. She made no further reply except by one of those light touches upon his arm less than momentary, if that were possible, like the brush of a wing, or an ethereal contact of ideas.

And then she said gravely, "Now about that poor, dear boy; we must find him, oh, we must find him. I have thought of several places where he may have been seen. Do you know that I met him once by chance in town last year? It was at the Academy, where I was with some artist friends. I introduced him to them, and you know there is great freedom among them, and they have a great charm for young men. I think some of them may have seen him. I have put myself in communication with them."

"I would not for a moment," said the Colonel, somewhat stiffly, "consent to burden you with inquiries of this kind!"

"You do not think," she said, sweetly, "that I would do anything, or say anything to compromise him or you?"

The Colonel looked at her with the strangest sudden irritation. "I was not thinking

either of him or myself. Why should you receive men, who must be entirely out of your way, for our sakes ? ”

“ Oh,” she said, with a soft laugh, “ you are afraid that I may compromise myself.” She rose with an unspoken impulse, which made him rise also, in spite of himself, with a feeling of unutterable downfall, and the sense of being dismissed. “ Don’t be afraid for me, Colonel Kingsward, I beg. I shall not compromise anyone.” Then she turned with a sudden illumination of a smile. “ Come back and see me to-morrow, and you shall hear what I have found out.”

And he went away humbly, relieved yet mortified, not holding his head as high as when he came, but already longing for to-morrow, when he might come back.

CHAPTER V.

COLONEL KINGSWARD had been flattered, he had been pleased. He had felt himself for a moment one of the exceptional men in whom women find an irresistible attraction, and then he had been put down and dismissed with the calmest decision, with a peremptoriness which nobody in his life had ever used to him. All these sweetnesses, and then to be, as it were, huddled out of doors the moment he said a word which was not satisfactory to that imperial person! He could not get it out of his mind during the evening nor all the night through, during which it occurred to him whenever he woke, as a prevailing thought does. And he had been right, too. To send for men, any kind of men, artists

whom she herself described as having so much freedom in their ways, and have interviews with them, was a thing to which he had a good right to object. That is, her friend had a right to object to it—her friend who took the deepest interest in her and all that she was doing. That it was for Charlie's advantage made really no difference. This gave a beautiful and admirable motive, but then all her motives were beautiful and admirable, and it must be necessary in some cases to defend her against the movements of her own good heart. Evidently she did not sufficiently think of what the world would say, nor, indeed, of what was essentially right; for that a woman of her attractions, still young, living independently in rooms of her own, should receive artists indiscriminately, nay, send for them, admit them to sit perhaps for an hour with her, with no chaperon or companion, was a thing that could not be borne. This annoyance almost drove Charlie out of Colonel Kingsward's head. He felt that when he went to her next day he must, with all the precautions possible, speak his mind upon this subject.

A woman with such attractions, really a young woman, alone; nobody could have more need of guarding against evil tongues. And artists were proverbially an unregulated, free-and-easy race, with long hair and defective linen, not men to be privileged with access under any circumstances to such a woman. Unquestionably he must deliver his soul on that subject for her own sake.

He thought about it all the morning, how to do it best. It relieved his mind about Charlie. Charlie! Charlie was only a young fellow after all, taking his own way, as they all did, never thinking of the anxiety he gave his family. And no doubt he would turn up of his own accord when he was tired of it. That she should depart from the traditions which naturally are the safeguards of ladies for the sake of a silly boy, who took so little trouble about the peace of mind of his family, was monstrous. It was a thing which he could not permit to be.

When he went into his private room at his office, Colonel Kingsward found a card upon his table which increased the uneasiness in his mind, though he could not have told why.

He took it up with great surprise and anger. "Mr. Aubrey Leigh." He supposed it must have been a card left long ago, when Aubrey Leigh was Bee's suitor, and had come repeatedly, endeavouring to shake her father's determination. He looked at it contemptuously, and then pitched it into the fire.

What a strange perversity there is in these inanimate things! It seemed as if some malicious imp must have replaced that card there on that very morning to disturb him.

Colonel Kingsward did not remember how it was that the name, the sacred name, of Miss Lance was associated with that of Aubrey Leigh. He had been much surprised, as well as angry, at the manner in which Bee repeated that name, when she heard it first, with a vindictive jealousy (these words came instinctively to his mind) which was not comprehensible. He had refused indignantly to allow that she had ever heard the name before. Nevertheless, her cry awakened a vague association in his mind. Something or other, he could not recollect what, of connection, of suggestion, was in the sound. He threw Aubrey's card into the

fire, and endeavoured to dismiss all thought on the subject. But it was a difficult thing to do. It is to be feared that during those morning hours the work which Colonel Kingsward usually executed with so much exactitude, never permitting, as he himself stated, private matters—even such as the death of his wife or the disappearance of his son—to interfere with it, was carried through with many interruptions and pauses for thought, and at the earliest possible moment was laid aside for that other engagement which had nothing to do either with the office or the Service, though it was, he flattered himself, a duty, and one of the most lofty kind.

To save a noble creature, if possible, from the over generosity of her own heart; to convince her that such proceedings were inappropriate, inconsistent with her dignity, as well as apt to give occasion for the adversary to blaspheme—this was the mission which inspired him. If he thought of a natural turning towards himself, the friend of friends, in respect to whom the precautions he enforced were unnecessary, in consequence

of these remonstrances, he kept it carefully in the background of his thoughts. It was a duty. This beautiful, noble woman, all frankness and candour, had taken the part of an angel in endeavouring to help him in his trouble. Could he permit her to sully even the tip of a wing of that generous effort. Certainly not! On the contrary, it became doubly his duty to protect her in every way.

This time Miss Lance was in her drawing-room, seated in one of the pair of chairs which were arranged for intimate conversation. She did not rise, but held out her hand to him, with a soft impulse towards the other—in which Colonel Kingsward accordingly seated himself, with a solemnity upon his brow which she had no difficulty in interpreting, quick-witted as she was. She did not lose a shade upon that forehead, a note of additional gravity in his voice. She knew as well as he did the duty which he had come to perform. And she was a woman—not only quick-witted and full of a definite aim, but one who took real pleasure in her own dexterity, and played her *rôle* with genuine enjoyment. She allowed him

to open the conversation with much dignified earnestness, and even to begin, "My dear Miss Lance," his countenance charged with warning before she cut the ground from under his feet in the lightest, yet most complete way.

"I know you are going to say something very serious when you adopt that tone, so please let me discharge my mind first. Mrs. Revel kindly came to me after you left yesterday, and she has made every inquiry—indeed, as she compelled me to go back with her to dinner, I saw for myself——"

"Mrs. Revel?" said the Colonel.

"Didn't you know he was married? Oh, yes, to a great friend of mine, a dear little woman. It is in their house I meet my artists, whom I told you of. Tuesday is her night, and they were all there. I was able to make my investigations without any betrayal. But I am very, very sorry to say, dear Colonel Kingsward, equally without any effect."

"Without any effect," Colonel Kingsward repeated, confused. He was not so quick-witted as she was, and it took him some time

to make his way through these mazes. Revel, the painter, was a name, indeed, that he had heard vaguely, but his wife, so suddenly introduced, and her "night," and the people described as my artists, wound him in webs of bewilderment through which it was very difficult to guide his steps. It became apparent to him, however, after a moment, that whatever those things might mean, the ground had been cut from under his feet. "Does Mrs. Revel know?" he added after a moment, in his bewilderment.

"Know—our poor dear boy? Oh, yes; I took him there—in my foolish desire to do the best I could for him, and thinking that to see other circles outside of his own was good for a young man. I couldn't take him the round of the studios, you know—could I? But I took him to the Revels. She is a charming little woman, a woman whom I am very fond of, and—more extraordinary still, don't you think, Colonel Kingsward?—who is fond of me."

The Colonel was not up to the mark in this emergency. He did not give the little compliment which is expected after such a

speech. He sat dumb, a dull, middle-aged blush rising over his face. He had no longer anything to say ; instead of the serious, even impassioned remonstrance which he was about to address to her, he could only murmur a faint assent, a question without meaning. And in place of the generous, imprudent creature, following her own hasty impulses, disregarding the opinion of the world, whom he had expected to find, here was female dignity in person, regulated by all the nicest laws of propriety. He was struck dumb—the ground was cut from beneath his feet.

“ This is only an interruption on my part. You were going to say something to me? And something serious? I prize so much everything you say that I must not lose it. Pray say it now, dear Colonel Kingsward. Have I done something you don't like? I am ready to accept even blame—though you know what women are in that way, always standing out that they are right—from you.”

Colonel Kingsward looked at her, helpless, still without a word to say. There was surely a laughing demon in her eyes which

saw through and through him and knew the trouble in his mind; but her face was serious, appealing, a little raised towards him, waiting for his words as if her fate hung upon them. The colour rose over his middle-aged countenance to the very hair which was beginning to show traces of white over his high forehead.

“Blame!” he stammered, scarcely knowing what he said, “I hope you don’t think me quite a fool.”

“What,” she cried, picking him up as it were on the end of her lance, holding him out to the scorn—if not of the world, yet of himself. “Do you think so little of a woman, Colonel Kingsward, that you would not take the trouble to find fault with her? Ah! Don’t be so hard! You would not be a fool if you did that—you should find that I would take it with gratitude, accept it, be guided by it. Believe me, I am worthy, if you think me in the wrong, to be told so—I am, indeed I am!”

Were these tears in her fine eyes? She made them look as if they were, and filled him with a compunction and a shame of his

own superficial judgment impossible to put into words.

"I—think you wrong!" he said, stammering and faltering. "I would as soon think that—heaven was wrong. I—blame you! Dear Miss Laura, how, how can you imagine such a thing? I should be a miserable idiot indeed if——"

"Come," she said, "I begin to think you didn't mean—now that you have called me by my name."

"I beg you a thousand pardons. I—I— It was a slip of the tongue. It was—from the signature to your letters—which is somehow so like you——"

"Yes," she said. "It pleases me very much that you should think so—more like me than Lance. Lance! What a name! My mother made a mesalliance. I don't give up my father, poor dear, though he has saddled me with such a family—but Laura is me, whereas Lance is only—an accident."

"An accident that may be removed," he said, involuntarily. It was a thing that might be said to any unmarried woman, a conventional sort of half compliment, which

custom would have permitted him to put in even stronger terms—but to her ! When he had said it horror seized his soul.

“ No,” she said, gently shaking her head. “ No. At my age one does not recover from an accident like that ; one must bear the scar all one’s days. And you really had nothing to find fault with me about ?”

“ How monstrous !” he cried, “ to entertain such a thought.” Then, for he was really uneasy in his sense of guilt, he plunged into a new snare. “ My little daughter, Betty,” he said, “ is coming to town to-day to visit some friends in Portman Square. I wonder if I might bring her to see you.”

“ Your daughter !” cried Miss Lance, clasping her hands, “ a thing I did not venture to ask—the very first desire of my heart. Your daughter ! I would go anywhere to see her. If you will be so nice, so sweet, so kind as to bring her, Colonel Kingsward !”

“ I shall, indeed, to-morrow. It will do her good to see you. At her susceptible age the very sight of such a woman as you—”

“ No compliments,” she cried, “ if I am not to be blamed I must not be praised

either—and I deserve it much less. Is she the eldest?" There was a gleam under her half-dropped eyelids which the Colonel was vaguely aware of but did not understand.

"The second," he said. "My eldest girl is Bee, in many respects a stronger character than her sister, but on the other hand—"

"I know," said Miss Lance, "a little wilful, fond of her own way and her own opinion. Oh, that is a good fault in a girl! When they are a little chastened they turn out the finest women. But I understand what a man must feel for this little sweet thing who has not begun to have a will of her own."

It was not perhaps a very perfect characterisation of Betty, but still it flattered him to see how she entered into his thoughts. "I think you understand everything," he said.

CHAPTER VI.

IT was not with any intention, but solely to deliver himself from the dilemma in which he found himself—the inconceivable error he had made, imagining that it was necessary to censure, however gently, and warn against too much freedom of action, a woman so absolutely above reproach, and so full of ladylike dignity as Miss Lance—that Colonel Kingsward had named the name of Betty, his little daughter, just arrived in that immaculate stronghold of the correct and respectable Portman Square. He was a little uneasy about it when he thought of it afterwards. He was not sure that he desired even Betty to be aware of his intimacy with Miss Lance. He felt that her

youthful presence would change, in some degree, the character of his relations with the enchantress who was stealing his wits away. The kind of conversation that had arisen so naturally between them, the sentiment, the confidences, the singular strain of mutual understanding which he felt, with mingled pride and bashfulness—bashfulness sat strangely upon the much-experienced Colonel, yet such was his feeling—to exist between Laura and himself, must inevitably sustain certain modifications under the sharp eyes of the child. She would not understand that subtle but strong link of friendship. He would require to be more distant, to treat his exquisite friend more like an ordinary acquaintance while under the inspection of Betty, even though he was perfectly assured that Betty knew nothing about such matters. And what, then, would Laura say? Confident as she was in her own perfect honour and candour, would she understand the subdued manner, the more formal address which would be necessary in the presence of the child? It was true that she understood everything without a word

said ; but then her own entire innocence of any motive but those of heavenly kindness and friendship might induce her to laugh at his precautions. Was it, perhaps, because he felt his motives to be not unmingled that the Colonel felt this? Anyhow, the introduction of Betty, whom he had snatched at in his haste to save him from the consequences of his own folly, would be a trouble to the intercourse which, as it was, was so consolatory and so sweet.

It must be added that Miss Lance, before he left her, had been very consolatory to him on the subject of Charlie, which, though always lying at the bottom of his thoughts, had begun in the midst of these new developments to weigh upon him less, perhaps, than it was natural it should have done. She had suggested that Charlie had friends in Scotland, that he had most probably gone there to avoid for a time his father's wrath, that in all probability he was enjoying himself, and very well cared for, putting off from day to day the necessity of writing.

"He never was, I suppose, much of a correspondent?" she said.

"No," Colonel Kingsward had replied, doubtfully ; for indeed there never had been anything at all to call correspondence between him and his son. Charlie had written to his mother, occasionally to his sisters, but to his father, save when he wanted money, scarcely at all.

"Then this is what has happened," said Laura ; "he has gone off to be as far out of the way as possible. He is fishing in Loch Tay—or he is playing golf somewhere—you know his habits."

"And so it seems do you," said the Colonel, a little jealous of his son.

"Oh, you know how a boy chatters of everything he does and likes."

Colonel Kingsward nodded his head gloomily. He did not know how boys chattered—no boy had ever chattered to him ; but he accepted with a moderate satisfaction the fact that she, Laura, from whom he felt that he himself could have no secret, had taken, and did take, the trouble of turning the heart even—of a boy—outside in.

"Depend upon it," said Miss Lance, "that is where he has gone, and he has not meant

to make you anxious. Perhaps he thinks you have never discovered that he had left Oxford, and he has meant to write day by day. Don't you know how one does that? It is a little difficult to begin, and one says, 'To-morrow,' and then 'To-morrow'; and the time flies on. Dear Colonel Kingsward, you will find that all this time he is quite happy on Loch Tay." She held out her hand to emphasise these words, and the Colonel, though all unaccustomed to such signs of enthusiasm, kissed that hand which held out comfort to him. It was a beautiful hand, so soft, like velvet, so yielding and flexible in his, and yet so firm in its delicate pressure. He went away with his head slightly turned, and the blood coursing through his veins. But when he thought of little Betty he dropped down, down into a blank of decorum and commonplace. Before Betty he certainly could not kiss any lady's hand. He would have to shake hands with Laura as he did with old Mrs. Lyon in Portman Square, who, indeed, was a much older friend. This thought gave him a little feeling of contrariety and uneasiness in the contemplation

of his promise to take his little girl to George Street, Hanover Square.

And next morning when he went into his office, Colonel Kingsward's annoyance and indignation could not be expressed when he found once more upon his writing-table, placed in a conspicuous position so that he could not overlook it, the card of Mr. Aubrey Leigh. Who had fished it out of the waste paper basket and placed it there? He rang his bell hastily to overwhelm his attendant with angry reproof. He could not have told, himself, why it made him so angry to see that card. It looked like some vulgar interference with his most private affairs.

"Where did you find this card?" he said, angrily, "and why is it replaced here? I threw it into the fire—or somewhere, yesterday—and here it is again as if the man had called to-day."

"The gentleman did call, sir, yesterday."

"What?" cried Colonel Kingsward, in a voice like a trumpet; but the man stood his ground.

"The gentleman did call, sir, yesterday. He has called two or three times; once when

you were in the country. He seemed very anxious to see you. I said two o'clock for a general thing, but you have been leaving the office earlier for a day or two."

"You are very impertinent to say anything of the kind, or to give anyone information of my private movements; see that it never occurs again. And as for this gentleman," he held up his card for a moment, looked at it contemptuously and then pitched it once more into the fireplace, "be so good as to understand that I will not see him, whether he comes at two or at any other hour."

"Am I to tell him so, sir?" said the man, annoyed.

"Of course you are to tell him so; and mind you don't bring me any message or explanation. I will not see him—that is enough; now you can go."

"Shall I—— say you're too busy, Colonel, or just going out, or engaged——?"

"No!" shouted Colonel Kingsward, with a force of breath which blew the attendant away like a strong wind. The Colonel returned to his work and his correspondence with an irritation and annoyance which even

to himself seemed beyond the occasion. Bee's old lover, he supposed, had taken courage to make another attempt; but nothing would induce him to change his former decision. He would not hear a word, not a word! A kind of panic mingled in his hasty impulse of rage. He would not so much as see the fellow—give him any opportunity of renewing—— Was it his suit to Bee? Was it something else indefinite behind? Colonel Kingsward did not very well know, but he was determined on one thing—not to allow the presence of this intruder, not to hear a word that he had to say.

And then about Betty—that was annoying too, but he had promised to do it, and to break his word to Laura was a thing he could not do. Laura—Miss Laura, if she pleased, though that is not a usual mode of address—but not Lance—how right she was! The name of Lance did not suit her at all, and yet how just and sweet all the same. Her mother had made a *mésalliance*, but there was no pettiness about her. She held by her father, though she was aware of his inferiority. And then he thought of her

as she shook her head gently, and smiled at his awkward stumbling suggestion that the accident of the name was not irremediable. "At my age,"—what was her age? The most delightful, the most fascinating of ages, whatever it was. Not the silly girlhood of Bee and Betty, but something far more entrancing, far more charming. These thoughts interfered greatly with his correspondence, and made the mass of foreign newspapers, and the military intelligence from all over the world, which it was his business to look over, appear very dull, uninteresting and confused. He rose hastily after a while, and took his hat and sallied forth to Portman Square, where he was expected to luncheon. He was relieved, on the whole, to be thus legitimately out of the way in case that fellow should have the audacity to call again.

"I want you to come out with me, Betty," he said, after that meal, which was very solemn, serious and prolonged, but very dull and not appetising. "I want to take you to see a friend—"

"Oh, papa! we are going to—— Mrs.

Lyon was going to take me to see Mr. Revel's picture before he sends it in."

"To-morrow will do, my dear, equally well, if your papa wants you to go anywhere."

"Mr. Revel's picture? He is precisely a friend of the friend I am going to take you to see." For a moment Colonel Kingsward wavered thinking how much more agreeable it would be to have his interview with Laura undisturbed by the presence of this little chit with her sharp eyes. But he was a soldier and faithful to his consignee. "If it will do as well to-morrow, and will not derange Mrs. Lyon's plans, I should like you to come now."

"Run and get ready, Betty," cried the old lady, to whom obedience was a great quality, "and there will still be time to go there, if you are not very long, when you come back."

The Colonel felt as if his foot was upon more solid ground; not that any doubt of Laura had ever been in his mind—but yet—— He had not suspected the existence of any link between her and Portman Square.

“ Mr. Revel is a very good painter, I suppose ?” he said.

“ A great painter, we all think ; and beginning to be really acknowledged in the art world,” said the old lady, who liked it to be known that she knew a great deal about pictures, and was herself considered to have some authority in that interesting sphere.

“ And—hasn’t he a wife ? I think I heard someone talking of his wife.”

“ Yes, a dear little woman !” cried Mrs. Lyon. “ Her Tuesdays are the most pleasant parties. We always go when we are able. Ah ! here is Betty, like a little rose. Now, acknowledge you are proud to have a little thing like that, Colonel, to walk with you through the park on a fine day like this ?”

Colonel Kingsward looked at Betty. She was a pretty little blooming creature. He did not regard her with any enthusiasm, and yet she was a creditable creature enough to belong to one. He gave a little nod of approving indifference. Betty was very much admired at Portman Square—from Gerald, who kept up an artillery of glances across the big table, to the old butler, who

called her attention specially to any dish that was nicer than usual, and carried meringues to her twice, she was the object of everybody's regards. Her father did not, naturally, look at her from the same point of view, but he was sufficiently pleased with her appearance. He was pleased, too, exhilarated, he could scarcely tell why, by the fact that Mrs. Lyon knew the painter's wife and spoke of her as a "dear little woman," the very words Laura had used. Did he require any guarantee that Laura herself was of the same order, knew the same sort of people as his other friends? Had such a question been put to him, the Colonel would have knocked the man down who made it, as in days when duelling was possible he would have called him out—— But yet—at all events it gave him much satisfaction that the British matron in the shape of Mrs. Lyon spoke no otherwise of the lady whom for one terrible moment of delusion he had intended to warn against intercourse, too little guarded, with such equivocal men as artists. He shuddered when he thought of that extraordinary aberration.

“Who is it, papa, we are going to see?” said Betty’s little voice by his side.

“It is a lady—who has taken a great interest in your brother.”

“Oh, papa, that I should not have asked that the first thing! Have you any news?”

“Nothing that I can call news, but I think I may say I have reason to believe that Charlie has gone up to the north to the Mackinnons. That does not excuse him for having left us in this anxiety; but the idea, which did not occur to me till yesterday, has relieved my mind.”

“To the Mackinnons!” said Betty, doubtfully, “but then I heard——” She stopped herself suddenly, and added after a moment, “How strange, papa, if he is there, that none of them should have written.”

“It is strange; but perhaps when you think of all things, not so very strange. He probably has not explained the circumstances to them, and they will think that he has written; they would not feel it necessary—why should they?—to let us know of his arrival. That, as a matter of course, they would expect him to have done. I don’t

think, on the whole, it is at all strange ; on his part inexcusable, but not to be expected from them."

" But, papa !" cried Betty.

" What is it ?" he said, almost crossly. " I don't mind saying," he added, " that even for him there may be excuses—if such folly can ever be excused. He never writes to me in a general way, and it would not be a pleasant letter to write ; and no doubt he has put it off from day to day, intending always to do it to-morrow—and every day would naturally make it more difficult." Thus he went on repeating unconsciously all the suggestions that had been made to him. " Remember, Betty," he said, " as soon as you see that you have done anything wrong, always make a clean breast of it at once ; the longer you put it off the more difficult you will find it to do."

" Yes, papa," said little Betty, with great doubt in her tone. She did not know what to think, for she had in her blotting book at Portman Square a letter lately received from one of these same Mackinnons in which not a word was said of Charlie. Why should

not Helen have mentioned him had he been there? And yet, if papa thought so, and if it relieved his mind to think so, what was Betty to set up a different opinion? Her mind was still full of this thought when she found herself following her father up the narrow stairs into the little drawing-room. There she was met by a lady, who rose and came forward to her, holding out two beautiful hands. "Such hands!" Betty said afterwards. Her own were plump, reddish articles, small enough and not badly shaped, but scarcely free from the scars and smirches of gardening, wild-flower collecting, pony saddling, all the unnecessary pieces of work that a country girl's, like a country boy's, are employed for. She had at the moment a hopeless passion for white hands. And these drew her close, while the beautiful face stooped over her and gave her a soft lingering kiss. Was it a beautiful face? At least it was very, very handsome—fine features, fine eyes, an imposing benignity, like a grand duchess at the very least.

"So this is little Betty," the lady said, to whom she was presented by that title, "just

out of last century, with her grandmother's name, and the newest version of her grandmother's hat. How pretty! Oh, it is your hat, you know, not you, that I am admiring. Like a little rose!"

Betty had no prejudices aroused in her mind by this lady's name, for Colonel Kingsward did not think it necessary to pronounce it. He said, "My little Betty," introducing the girl, but he did not think it needful to make any explanations to her. And she thus fell, all unprotected, under the charm. Laura talked to her for full five minutes without taking any notice of the Colonel, and drew from her all she wanted to see, and the places to which she was going, making a complete conquest of the little girl. It was only when Colonel Kingsward's patience was quite exhausted, and he was about to jump up and propose somewhat sullenly to leave his daughter with her new friend, that Miss Lance turned to him suddenly with an exclamation of pleasure.

"Did you hear, Colonel Kingsward? She was going to see Arthur Revel's picture this afternoon. And so was I! Will you come

too? He is a great friend of mine, as I told you, and he knew dear Charlie, and, of course, he would be proud and delighted to see you. Shall we take Betty back to Portman Square to pick up her carriage and her old lady, and will you go humbly on foot with me? We shall meet them, and Mrs. Revel shall give us tea."

"Oh, papa, do!" Betty cried.

It was not perhaps what he would have liked best, but he yielded with a very good grace. He had not, perhaps, been so proud of little Betty by his side as the Lyons had expected, but Laura by his side was a different matter. He could not help remarking how people looked at her as they went along, and his mind was full of pride in the handsome, commanding figure, almost as tall as himself, and walking like a queen. Yet it made his head turn round a little when he saw Miss Lance seated by Mrs. Lyon's side in the studio, talking intimately to her of the whole Kingsward family, while Betty clung to her new friend as if she had known her all her life. Old Mrs. Lyon was still more startled, and her head went round too.

“What a handsome woman!” she said, in Colonel Kingsward’s ear. “What a delightful woman! Who is she?”

“Miss Lance,” he said, rather stupidly, feeling how little information these words conveyed. Miss Lance? Who was Miss Lance? If he had said Laura it might have been a different matter.

CHAPTER VII.

While all these things were going on, Bee was left at Kingswarden alone. That is to say, she was so far from being alone that her solitude was absolute. She had all the children and was very busy among them. She had the two boys home for the Easter holidays ; the house was full of the ordinary noise, mirth and confusion natural to a large young family under no more severe discipline than that exercised by a young elder sister. The big boys, were in their boyish way, gentlemen, and deferred to Bee more or less—which set a good example to the younger ones ; but she was enveloped in a torrent of talk, fun, games and jest, which raged round her from before she got up in the morning

till at least the twilight, when the nursery children got tired, and the big boys having exhausted every method of amusement during the day, began to feel the burden of nothing to do, and retired into short-lived attempts at reading, or games of beggar-my-neighbour, or any other simple mode of possible recreation—descending to the level of imaginary football with an old hat through the corridor before it was time to go to bed.

In the evening Bee was thus completely alone, listening to the distant bumps in the passage, and the voices of the players. The drawing-room was large, but it was indifferently lighted, which is apt to make a country drawing-room gloomy in the evening. There was one shaded lamp on a writing-table, covered at this moment with colour boxes and rough drawings of the boys, who had been constructing a hut in the grounds, and wasting much vermilion and Prussian blue on their plans for it ; and near the fireplace, in which the chill of the Spring still required a little fire, was another lamp, shining silently upon Bee's white dress and her hands crossed in her lap. Her face and all its thoughts

were in the shade, nobody to share, nobody to care what they were.

Betty was in town. Her one faithful though not always entirely sympathetic companion, the aunt—at all times not much more than a piece of still life—was unwell and had gone to bed; Charlie was lost in the great depth and silence of the world; Bee was thus alone. She had been working for the children, making pinafores or some other necessary, as became her position as sister-mother; for where there are so many children there is always a great deal to do; but she had grown tired of the pinafores. If it were not a hard thing to say she was a little tired of the children too, tired of having to look after them perpetually, of the nurse's complaints, and the naughtiness of baby who was spoilt and unmanageable—tired of the bumping and laughing of the boys, and tired too of bidding them be quiet, not to rouse the children.

All these things had suddenly become intolerable to Bee. She had a great many times expressed her thankfulness that she had so much to do, and no time to think—and probably to-morrow morning she would

again be of that opinion ; but in the meantime she was very tired of it all—tired of a position which was too much for her age, and which she was not able to bear. She was only a speck in the long, empty drawing-room, her white skirts and her hands crossed in her lap being all that showed distinctly, betraying the fact that someone was there, but with her face hidden in the rosy shade, there was nobody to see that tears had stolen up into Bee's eyes. Her hands were idle, folded in her lap. She was tired of being dutiful and a good girl, as the best of girls are sometimes. It seemed to her for the moment a dreary world in which she was placed, merely to take care of the children, not for any pleasure of her own. She felt that she could not endure for another moment the bumping in the passage, and the distant voices of the boys. Probably if they went on there would be a querulous message from Aunt Helen, or pipings from the nursery of children woke up, and a furious descent of nurse, more than insinuating that Miss Bee did not care whether baby's sleep was broken or not. But even with this

certainty before her, Bee did not feel that she had energy to get up from her chair and interfere ; it was too much. She was too solitary, left alone to bear all the burden.

Then the habitual thought of Charlie returned to her mind. Poor Charlie ! Where was he, still more alone than she. Perhaps hidden away in the silence of the seas, or tossing in a storm, going away, away where no one who cared for him would ever see him more. The tears which had come vaguely to her eyes dropped, making a mark upon her dress, legitimatised by this thought. Bee would have been ashamed had they fallen for herself ; but for Charlie—Charlie lost !—none of his family knowing where he was—she might indeed be allowed to cry. Where was he ? Where was he ? If he had been here he would have been sitting with her, making things more possible. Bee knew very well in her heart that if Charlie had been with her he would not have been much help to her, that he would have been grumbling over his own hard fate, and calling upon her to pity him ; but the absent, if they are sometimes wronged, have, on

the other hand, the privilege of being remembered in their best aspect. Then Bee's thoughts glided on from Charlie to someone else whom she had for a long time refused to think of, or tried to refuse to think of. She was so solitary to-night, with all her doors open to recollections, that he had stolen in before she knew, and now there was quite a shower of round blots upon her white dress. Aubrey—oh, Aubrey! who had betrayed her trust so, who had done her such cruel wrong!—but yet, but yet——

She was interrupted by the entrance of a servant with the evening post. Kingswarden was near enough to town to have an evening post, which is a privilege not always desirable. But any incident was a good thing for poor Bee. She drew the pinafore, at which she had been working, hastily over her knee to hide the spots of moisture, and dashed the tears from her eyes with a rapid hand. In the shade of the lamp not even the most keen eyes could see that she had been crying. She even paused as she took the letter to say, "Will you please tell the boys not to make so much noise?" There were three letters

on the tray—one for her father, one for her aunt, one Betty's usual daily rigmarole of little news and nonsense which she never failed to send when she was away. Betty's letter was very welcome to her sister. But as Bee read it her face began to burn. It became more and more crimson, so that the rose shade of the lamp was overpowered by a deeper and hotter colour. Betty to turn upon her, to take up the other side, to cast herself under that dreadful new banner of Fate! Bee's breath came quickly, her heart beat with anger and trouble. She got up from her chair and began to walk quickly about the room, a sudden passion sweeping away all the forlorn sentiment of her previous thoughts. Betty! in addition to all the rest. Bee felt like the forlorn *chatelaine* of a besieged castle alone to defend the walls against the march of a destroying invader. The danger which had been far off was coming—it was coming! And the castle had no garrison at all—if it were not perhaps those dreadful boys making noise enough to bring down the house, who were precisely the partisans least to be

depended upon, who would probably throw down their arms without striking a blow. And Bee was alone, the captain deserted of all her forces to defend the sacred hearth and the little children. The little children! Bee stamped her foot upon the floor in an appeal, not to heaven, but to all the powers of Indignation, Fury, War, War! She would defend those walls to her last gasp. She would not give way, she would fight it out step by step, to keep the invader from the children. The nursery should be her citadel. Oh, she knew what would happen, she cried to herself inconsequently! Baby, who was spoilt, would be twisted into rigid shape, the little girls would be subdued like little mice—the boys—

At this moment the old hat which served as a football came with a thump from the corridor into the hall, followed by a louder shout than ever from Arthur and Rex. Bee rushed forth upon them flinging the door open, with her blue eyes blazing.

“Do you mean to bring down the house?” she said, in a sudden outburst. “Do you mean to break the vases and the mirror and

wake up the whole nursery and bring Aunt Helen down upon us? For goodness sake try to behave like reasonable creatures, and don't drive me out of my senses!" cried Bee.

The boys were so startled by this onslaught that Rex, with a final kick sent the wretched old hat flying to the end of the passage which led to the servants' hall, as if it were that harmless object that was to blame—while Arthur covered the retreat sulkily by a complaint that there was nothing to do in this beastly old hole, and that a fellow couldn't read books all the day long. Bee was so inspired and thrilling with the passion in her, that she went further than any properly constituted female creature knowing her own position ought to do.

"You have a great deal more to do than I have," she said, "far, far more to do and to amuse yourselves with. Why should you expect so much more than I do, because you are boys and I am a girl? Is it fair? You're always talking of things being fair. It isn't fair that you should disturb the whole house, the little babies, and everyone for your pleasure; and I'm not so very much

older than you are, and what pleasure have I?"

The boys were very much cast down by this fiery remonstrance. There had been a squall as of several babies from the upper regions, and they had already been warned of the consequence of their horseplay. But Bee's representation touched them in their tenderest point. Was it fair? Well, no, perhaps it was not quite fair. They went back after her, humbled, into the drawing-room, and besought her to join them in a game. After they had finally retired, having finished the evening to their own partial content, Bee took out again Betty's letter and read it with less excitement than at first—or at least with less demonstration of excitement; this was what it said—

"Bee, such a delightful woman, a friend of her papa's! So handsome, so nice, so clever, so well dressed, everything you can think except young, which of course she is not—nor anything silly. Papa told me to get ready to come out with him to see an old friend of his and I wasn't at all willing, didn't like it, I' thought it must be some old image like old

Mrs. Mackinnon or Nancy Eversfield, don't you know. Mrs. Lyon had settled to take me out to see some pictures, and Gerald was coming, and we were to have a turn in the park after, and I had put on my new frock and was looking forward to it, when papa came in with this order: 'Get on your things and come with me, I want to take you to see an old friend.' Of course I had to go, for Mrs. Lyon will never allow me to shirk anything. But I was not in a very good humour, though they called me as fresh as a rose and all that—to please papa; as if he cared how we look! He took me to George Street, Hanover Square, a horrid little lodging, such as people come to when they come up from the country. And I had to look as serious and as steady as possible for the sake of the old lady; when there rose up from the chair, oh, such a different person, tall, but as slight as you are, with such a handsome face and such a manner. She might have been—let us say a nice, sweet aunt—but aunt is not a name that means anything delightful; and mother I must not say, for there is only one mother in the whole world; oh, but some-

thing I cannot give a name, so understanding, so kind, so *nice*, for that means everything. She kissed me, and then she began to talk to me as if she knew everyone of us and was very fond of us all. And then about Charlie, whom she seemed to know very well. She called him dear Charlie, and I wonder if it is she who has persuaded papa that he is with the Mackinnons, in Scotland. But I know he is not with the Mackinnons—however, I will tell you about this after.

“Dear Bee, what will you say when I tell you that this delightful woman is Miss Lance? You will say I have no heart, or no spirit, and am not sticking to you through thick and thin as I ought; but you must hear first what I have got to say. Had I known it was Miss Lance I should have shut myself close up, and whatever she had done or however nice she had been, I should have had nothing to say to her. If she had been an angel under that name I should have remembered what you had said, and I should not have seen any good in her. But I never heard what her name was till we were all in Mr Revel’s studio, quite a long time after.

Papa did as he always does, introduced me to her, but not her to me. He said: "My daughter Betty," as if I must have known by instinct who she was. And, dear Bee, though I acknowledge you have every reason not to believe it, she is delightful, she is, she is! She may have done wrong. I can't tell, of course; but I don't believe she ever meant it, or to harm you, or Charlie, or anyone. Everybody is delighted with her. Mrs. Lyon, who you know is very particular, says she has the manners of a duchess—and that she is such a handsome, distinguished-looking woman. She is coming to dine here next Saturday. The only one who does not seem to be quite charmed with her is Gerald, who is prejudiced like you.

"Do try to get over your prejudice, Bee, dear—she is, she is, indeed delightful! You only want to know her. By the way, about the Mackinnons: papa has got it firmly into his head that Charlie is there; he says his mind is quite relieved about him, and that the more he thinks of it, the more he is certain it is so; now I know that it is not so. I got a letter from Helen Mackinnon the day

I came here, and there is not a word about Charlie—and she would have been certain to have mentioned him had he been there. I tried to say this to papa, but his head was so full of the other idea that he did not hear me at first, and I couldn't go on. I whispered to Miss Lance in the studio, and asked her what I should do? She was so troubled and distressed about Charlie that the tears came into her eyes, but, after thinking a moment, she said, 'Oh, dear child, don't say anything. Your young friend might have been in a hurry, she might not have thought it necessary to speak of your brother. Oh, don't let us worry him now! Bad news always comes soon enough, and, of course, he will find it out if it is so.' Do you think she was right? But, oh Bee, dear Bee, I am afraid you will not think anything she says is right; and yet she is *delightful*. If only you knew her! Write directly, and tell me all you think."

Bee was not excited on this second reading. She did not spring to her feet, nor stamp on the floor, or feel inclined to call upon all the infernal gods. But her heart

sank down as if it would never rise again, and a great pain took possession of her. Who was this witch, this magician, that everyone who belonged to Bee should be drawn into her toils—even Betty. What could she want with Betty, who was only a little girl, who was her sister's natural second and support? Bee sat a long time with her head in her hands, letting the fire go out, feeling cold and solitary and miserable, and frightened to death.

CHAPTER VIII.

IN the afternoon of the next day, Bee was again alone. The old aunt had come down for lunch, but gone up to her room again to rest after that meal. It was a little chilly outside. The children, of course, wrapped up in their warm things, and in the virtue of the English nursery, which shrinks from no east wind, were out for their various walks. The big boys, attended by such of the little boys as could be trusted with these athletes, were taking violent exercise somewhere, and Bee sat by the fire, alone. It is not a place for a girl of twenty. The little pinafore, half made, was on the table beside her. She had a book in her hand. Perhaps had she been a young wife looking for the return of her

young husband in the evening, with all the air of the bigger world about him and an abundance of news, and plans, and life, a pretty enough picture might have been made of that cosy fireside retirement.

But even this ideal has ceased to be satisfactory to the present generation. And Bee's spirits and heart were very low. She had despatched a fiery letter to Betty, and with this all her anger had faded away. She had no courage to do anything. She seemed to have come to an end of all possibilities. She had no longer anyone to fall back upon as a supporter and sympathiser—not even Betty. Even this closest link of nature seemed to have been broken by that enemy.

To have an enemy is not a very common experience in modern life. People may do each other small harms and annoyances, but to most of us the strenuous appeals and damnations of the Psalmist are quite beyond experience. But Bee had come back to the primitive state. She had an enemy who had succeeded in taking from her everything she cared for. Aubrey her betrothed, Charlie, her father, her sister, one after the other in

quick succession. It was not yet a year and a half since she first heard this woman's name, and in that time all these losses had happened. She was not even sure that her mother's death was not the work of the same subtle foe ; indeed, she brought herself to believe that it was at least accelerated by all the trouble and contention brought into the family by her own misery and rebellion—all the work of that woman ! Why, why, had Bee been singled out for this fate ? A little girl in an English house, like other girls—no worse, no better. Why should she alone in all England have this bitterness of an enemy to make her desolate and break her heart ?

While she was thus turning over drearily those dismal thoughts, there was a messenger approaching to point more sharply still the record of these disasters and their cause. Bee had laid down her book in her lap ; her thoughts had strayed completely from it and gone back to her own troubles, when the door of the drawing-room opened quietly and a servant announced "Mrs. Leigh." Mrs. Leigh ! It is not an uncommon name. A Mrs. Lee lived in the village, a Mrs.

Grantham Lea was the clergyman's wife in the next parish. Bee drew her breath quickly and composed her looks, but thought of no visitor that could make her heavy heart beat. Not even when the lady came in, a more than middle-aged matron, of solid form and good colour, dressed with the subdued fashionableness appropriate to her age. It was not Mrs. Lee from the village, nor Mrs. Grantham Lea, nor—— Yet Bee had seen her before. She rose up a little startled and made a step or two forward.

“You do not know me, Miss Kingsward? I cannot wonder at it, since we met but once, and that in circumstances—— Don't start nor fly, though I see you have recognised me.”

“Indeed I did not think of flying. Will you—will you—sit down.”

“You need not be afraid of me, my poor child,” said Mrs. Leigh.

Aubrey's mother seated herself and looked with a kind yet troubled look at the girl, who still stood up in the attitude in which she had risen from her chair. “I scarcely saw you the other time,” she said. “It was in the

garden. You did not give me a good reception. I should like much, sometime or other, if you would tell me why. I have never made out why. But don't be afraid ; it is not on that subject I have come to you now."

Bee seated herself. She kept her blue eyes, which seemed expanded and larger than usual, but had none of the former indignant blaze in them, fixed on the old lady's face.

"Your father is not here, the servant tells me—"

"No—he is in town," she answered, faltering, almost too much absorbed by anticipation to reply.

"And you are alone—nobody with you to stand by you?"

"Mrs. Leigh," said Bee, catching her breath, "I don't know why you should ask me such questions, or—or be sorry for me. I don't need anybody to be sorry for me."

"Poor little girl! We needn't go into that question. I am sorry for any girl who is motherless, who has to take her mother's place. I would much rather have spoken to your father had he been here."

“After all,” said Bee, “my father could say nothing. It is I who must decide for myself.”

She said this with an involuntary betrayal of her consciousness that there could be but one subject between them, and it was not in the power of Aubrey Leigh’s mother, however strongly aware she was of another theme on which she had come to speak, not to note how different was Bee’s reception of her from the other time, when the girl had fled from her presence and would not even hear what she had to say. Bee’s eyes were large and humid and full of an anxiety which was almost wistful. She had the air of refusing to hear with her lips, but eagerly expecting with her whole heart what was about to be said. And she looked so young, so solitary, in her mother’s chair, with a mother’s work lying about, the head of this silent house—that the heart of the elder woman was deeply touched. If little Betty had been like a rose, Bee was almost as white as the cluster of fragrant white narcissus that stood on the table. Poor little girl, so subdued and changed from the little passionate creature

who would not hear a word, and whose indignation was stronger than even the zeal of the mother who had come to plead her son's cause!

Mrs. Leigh drew a little nearer and took Bee's hand. The girl did not resist, but kept her eyes upon her steadily, watching, her mind in a great turmoil, not knowing what to expect.

"My dear," said the old lady, "don't be alarmed. I have not come to speak about Aubrey. I cannot help hoping that one day you will do him justice; but, in the meantime, it is something else that has brought me here. Miss Kingsward—your brother—"

Bee's hand, in this lady's clasp, betrayed her in spite of herself. It became limp and uninterested when she was assured that Aubrey was not in question; and then, at her brother's name, was snatched suddenly away.

"My brother?" she cried, "Charlie!" Then, subduing herself, "What do you know about him? Oh," clasping her hands as new light seemed to break upon her, "you have come to tell me some bad news?"

“I hope not. My son found him some time ago, disheartened and unhappy about leaving Oxford. He persuaded him to come and share his rooms. He has been with him more or less all the time, which I hope may be a comfort to you. And then he fell ill. My dear Aubrey has tried to see your father, but in vain, and poor Charlie is not anxious, I fear, to see his father. Yes, he has been ill, but not so seriously that we need fear anything serious. He has shaken off the complaint, but he wants rousing—he wants someone whom he loves. Aubrey sent for me a fortnight ago. He has been well taken care of, there is nothing really wrong. But we cannot persuade him to rouse himself. It is illness that is at the bottom of it all. He would not have left you without news of him, he would not shrink from his father if he were not ill. Bee, I will confess to you that it is Aubrey who has sent me ; but don't be afraid, it is for Charlie's sake—only for Charlie's sake. He thinks if you would but come to him—if you would have the courage to come—to your brother, Bee.”

“He—he thinks? Not Charlie—you don't mean Charlie?” Bee cried.

“Charlie does not seem to wish for anything. We cannot rouse him. We think that the sight of someone he loves——”

Bee was full of agitation. Her lips quivered ; her hands trembled. “Oh, me !” she said ; “I am no one. It is not for his sister a boy cares. I do not think I should do him any good. Oh, Charlie, Charlie ! all this time that we have been blaming him so, thinking him so cruel, he has been lying ill ! If I could do him any good !” she cried, wringing her hands.

“The sight of you would do him good. It is not that he wants a nurse—I have seen to that ; but no nurse could rouse him as the sight of some of his own people would. Do not question, my dear, but come—oh, come ! He thinks he is cut off from everybody, that his father will never see him, that you must all have turned against him. Words will not convince him, but to see you, that would do so. He would feel that he was not forsaken.”

“Oh, forsaken ! How could he think it ? He must know that we have been breaking our hearts. It was he who forsook us all.”

Bee had risen again, and stood leaning upon the mantelpiece, too much shaken and agitated to keep still. Though she had thought herself so independent, she had in reality never broken the strained band of domestic subjugation. She had never so much as gone, though it was little more than an hour's journey, to London on her own authority. The thought of taking such a step startled her. And that she should do this on the word and in the company of Aubrey's mother—Aubrey, for whom she had once been ready to abandon everything, from whom she had been violently separated, whom she had cast off, flung away from her without hearing a word he had to say! How could she put herself in his way again—go with his mother, accept his services? Bee had acted quickly on the impulse of passion in all that had happened to her before. But she had not known the conflict, the rending asunder of opposite emotions. In the whirl of her thoughts her lover, whom she had cast off, came between her and the brother whom he had succoured. It was to Aubrey's house, to his very dwelling where he was, that she

must go if she went to Charlie. And Charlie wanted her, or at least needed her, lying weak and despairing, waiting for a sign from home. It was difficult to realise her brother so, or to believe, indeed, that he could want her very much, that there was any yearning in his heart towards his own flesh and blood. But Mrs. Leigh thought so, and how could she refuse? How could she refuse? The problem was too much for her. She looked into Mrs. Leigh's face with an appeal for help.

"My dear," her companion said, leaving a calm and cool hand upon Bee's arm, which trembled with nervous excitement, "If you are afraid of meeting Aubrey, compose yourself. Aubrey would rather go to the end of the world than give you any pain, or put himself in your way. We are laying no trap for you—I should not have come if the case had not been urgent. Never would I have come had it been a question of my son; I would not beguile you even for his sake. It is for your brother, Bee; not for Aubrey, not for Aubrey!"

Not for Aubrey! Was that any comfort,

was there any strength in that assurance? At all events, these were the words that rang through Bee's head, as she made her hurried preparations. She had almost repeated them aloud in the hasty explanations she made to Moss upstairs, who was now at the head of the nursery, and to the housekeeper below. To neither of these functionaries did it seem of any solemn importance that Bee should go away for a day or two. There was no objection on their part to being left at the head of affairs. And then Bee felt herself carried along by the whirl of strange excitement and feeling which rather than the less etherial methods of an express train seemed to sweep her through the air of the darkening spring night by Mrs. Leigh's side. A few hours before she had felt herself the most helpless of dependent creatures, abandoned by all, incapable of doing anything. And now, what was she doing? Rushing into the heart of the conflict, assuming an individual part in it, acting on her own responsibility. She could scarcely believe it was herself who sat there by Mrs. Leigh's side.

But not for Aubrey, not for Aubrey! This kept ringing in her ears, like the tolling of a bell, through all the other sounds. She sat in one corner of the carriage, and listened to Mrs. Leigh's explanations, and to the clang of the engine and rush of the train, all mingled together in bewildering confusion. But the other voice filled all space, echoing through everything. Bee felt herself trembling on the edge of a crisis, such as her life had never known. All the world seemed to be set against her, her enemy, perhaps her father, and all the habitual authorities of her young and subject life, now suddenly rising into rebellion. She would have to do and say things which she would not have ventured so much as to think of a little time ago ; but whatever she might have to encounter there was to be no renewal to Bee of her own story and meaning. It was not for Aubrey that she was called or wanted—for the succour of others, for sisterly help, for charity and kindness ; but not for her own love or life.

CHAPTER IX.

IT was to a house in one of the streets of Mayfair that Mrs. Leigh conveyed her young companion ; one of those small expensive places where persons within the circle of what is called the world in London contrive to live with as little comfort and the greatest expenditure possible. It is dark and often dingy in Mayfair ; nowhere is it more difficult to keep furniture, or even human apparel, clean ; the rooms are small and the streets shabby ; but it is one of the right places in which to live, not so perfect as it was once, indeed, but still furnishing an unimpeachable address.

It had half put on the aspect of the season by this time ; some of the balconies were full

of flowers, and the air of resuscitation which comes to certain quarters of London after Easter, as if, indeed, they too had risen from the dead, was vaguely visible. To be sure, little of this was apparent in the dim lamplight when the two ladies arrived at the door. Bee was hurried upstairs through the narrow passage, though she had been very keenly aware that someone in the lower room had momentarily lifted the blind to look out as they arrived—someone who did not appear, who made no sound, who had nothing to do with her or her life.

The rooms, which are usually the drawing-rooms of such a house, were turned evidently into the apartments of the sufferer. In the back room which they entered first was a nurse who greeted the ladies in dumb show, and whose white head-dress and apron had the strangest effect in the semi-darkness. She said, half by gesture, half with whispered words more visible than audible, "He is up — better — impatient — good sign — discontented with everything. Is this the lady?"

Mrs. Leigh answered in the same way, "His sister—shall I go with her?—you?—alone?"

“By herself,” said the nurse, laconic ; and almost inaudible as this conversation was, it occasioned a stirring and movement in the inner room.

“What a noise you make,” cried a querulous, unsteady voice, “Who’s there—who’s there?”

The nurse took Bee’s hat from her head, with a noiseless swift movement, and relieved her of the little cloak she was wearing. She took her by the arm and pushed her softly forward. “Nothing to worry. Soothe him,” she breathed, holding up a curtain that Bee might pass. The room was but badly lighted, a single lamp on a table almost extinguished by the shade, a fire burning though the night was warm, and one of the long windows open, letting in the atmosphere and sounds of the London street. Bee stole in, an uncertain shadow into the shaded room, less eager than frightened and overawed by this sudden entrance into the presence of sickness and misery. She was not accustomed to associate such things with her brother. It did not seem anyone with whom she was acquainted that she was about to see.

"Oh, Charlie!" the little cry and movement she made, falling down on her knees beside him, raised a pale, unhappy face, half covered with the down of an irregular fledgling beard from the pillow.

"Hallo!" he said, and then in a tone of disappointment and disdain, "You!"

"Oh, Charlie, Charlie dear! You have been ill and we never knew."

"How do you know now? They knew I never wanted you to know," he said.

"Oh, Charlie—who ought to know but your own people? We have been wretched, thinking all sorts of dreadful things—but not this."

"Naturally," he said, "my own people might be trusted never to think the right thing. Now you do know you may as well take yourself off. I don't want you—or anybody," he added, with an impatient sigh.

"Charlie—oh, please let me stay with you. Who should be with you but your sister? And I know—a great deal about nursing. Mamma——"

"I say—hold your tongue, can't you? Who wants you to talk—of anything of that sort?"

Bee heard a slight stir in the curtains, and looking back hastily as she dried her streaming eyes saw the laconic nurse making signs to her. The sight of the stranger was more effectual even than her signs, and restored Bee's self-command at once.

"Why did they bring you here?" said Charlie. "I didn't want you; they know what I want, well enough."

"What is it you want, oh, Charlie dear? Papa—and all of us—will do anything in the world you want."

"Papa," he said, and his weakened and irregular voice ran through the gamut from a high feeble tone of irritation to the quaver of that self-pity which is so strong in all youthful trouble. "Yes, he would be pleased to get me out of the way, and be done with me now."

"Oh, Charlie! You know how wrong that is. Papa has been—miserable—"

Charlie uttered a feeble laugh. He put his hand upon his chin, stroking down the irregular tufts of hair; even in his low state the poor boy had a certain pride in what he believed to be his beard.

"Not much," he said. "I daresay you've made a fuss—Betty and you. The governor will crack up Arthur for the F.O. and let me drop like a stone."

"No, Charlie, no. He has no such thought—he has taken such trouble not to let it be known. He would not advertise or anything."

"Advertise!" A sudden hot flush came over the gaunt face. "For me!" It did not seem that such a thought had ever occurred to the young man. "Like the fellows in the newspapers that steal their master's money—'All is arranged and you can return to your situation.' By George!"

There was again a faint rustle in the curtains. Bee sprang up with her natural impatience, and went straight to the spot whence this sound had come.

"If I am not to speak to my brother alone and in freedom, I will not speak to him at all," she said.

The laconic nurse remonstrated violently with her lips and eyes.

"Don't excite him. Don't disturb him. He'll not sleep all night," she managed to

convey, with much arching of the eyebrows and mouth, then disappeared silently out of the bedroom behind.

“What’s that?” said Charlie, sharply. He moved on his sofa, and turned his head round with difficulty. “Are there more of you to come?”

There seemed a kind of hope and expectation in the question, but when Bee answered with despondency, “There’s only me, Charlie,” he broke out harshly :

“I don’t want you—I want none of you ; I told them so. You can go and tell my father, as soon as they let me get out I’m going off to New Zealand or somewhere—the furthest-off place I can get to.”

“Oh, Charlie!” cried Bee, taking every word as the sincerest utterance of a fixed intention, “what could you do there?”

“Die, I suppose,” he said, with again that quaver of self-compassion in his voice, “or go to the dogs, which will be easy enough. You may say, why didn’t I die here and be done with it? I don’t know—I’m sure I wanted to. It was that doctor fellow, and that woman that talks with her eyebrows, and

that confounded cad, Leigh—they wouldn't let me. And I've got so weak ; if you don't go away this moment I'll cry like a dashed baby !” with a more piteous quaver than ever in the remnant of his once manly voice.

All that Bee could do was to throw her arms round his neck and draw his head upon her shoulder, which he resisted fiercely for a moment, then yielded to in the abandonment of his weakness. Poor Charlie felt, perhaps, a momentary sweetness in the relaxation of all the bonds of self-control, and all the well-meaning attempts to keep him from injuring himself by emotion ; the unexpected outburst did him good, partly because it was a breach of all the discipline of the sick room. Presently he came to himself and pushed Bee away.

“ What do you come bothering about ?” he said ; “ you ought to have left me alone. I've made my bed, and I've got to lie on it. I don't suppose that anyone has taken the trouble to—ask about me ?” he added, after a little while, in what was intended for a careless tone.

“ Oh, Charlie, everyone who has known ;

but papa would let nobody know : except at Oxford. We—went to Oxford——”

He got up on his pillow with his eyes shining out of their hollow sockets, his long limbs coming to the ground with a faint thump. Poor Charlie was young enough to have grown during his illness, and those gaunt limbs seemed unreasonably long.

“ You went to Oxford !” he said, “ and you saw——”

“ Dear Charlie, they will say I am exciting you—doing you harm——”

“ You saw ?” he cried, bringing down his fist upon the table with a blow that made the very floor shake.

“ Yes,” said Bee, trembling, “ we saw—or rather papa saw——”

He pushed up the shade of the lamp with his long bony fingers, and fixed his eyes, bright with fever, on her face.

“ Oh, Charlie, don’t look at me so !—the lady whom you used to talk to me about—whom I saw in the academy——”

“ Yes ?”—he grasped her hand across the table with a momentary hot pressure.

“ She came and saw papa in the hotel.

She told him about you, and that you had—oh, Charlie, and she so old—as old as——”

“Hold your tongue!” he cried, violently, and then with a long-drawn breath, “What more? She told him—and he was rude, I suppose. Confound him! Confound—confound them all!”

“I will not say another word unless you are quiet,” said Bee, her spirit rising; “put up your feet on the sofa and be quiet, and remember all the risk you are running—or I will not say another word.”

He obeyed her with murmurs of complaint, but no longer with the languid gloom of his first accost. Hope seemed to have come into his heart. He subdued himself, lay back among his pillows, obeyed her in all she stipulated. The light from underneath the raised shade played on his face and gave it a tinge of colour, though it showed more clearly the emaciation of the outlines and the aspect of neglect, rather than, as poor Charlie hoped, of enhanced manly dignity, conveyed by the irregular sick man’s growth of the infant beard.

“Papa was not rude,” said Bee, “he is

never rude ; he is a gentleman. Worse than that—”

“Worse—than what?”

“Oh, I cannot understand you at all, you and—the rest,” cried the girl ; “one after another you give in to her, you admire her, you do what she tells you—that woman who has harmed me all she can, and you all she can, and now—Charlie!” Bee stopped with astonishment and indignation. Her brother had raised himself up again, and aimed a furious but futile blow at her in the air. It did not touch her, but the indignity was no less on that account.

“Well,” he cried, again bringing down that hand which could not reach her, on the table, “How dare you speak of one you’re not worthy to name? Ah! I might have known she wouldn’t desert me. It is she who has kept the way open, and subdued my father, and——” An ineffable look of happiness came upon the worn and gaunt countenance, his eyes softened, his voice fell. “I might have known!” he said to himself, “I might have known!”

And what could Bee say? Though she

did not believe in—though she hated and feared with a child's intensity of terror the woman who had so often crossed her path—she could not contradict her brother's faith, though she considered it an infatuation, a folly beyond belief ; it seemed, after all, in a manner true that this woman had not deserted him. She had subdued his father's displeasure somehow, made everything easier. Bee looked at him, the victim of those wiles, yet nevertheless indebted to them, with the same exasperation which her father's subjugation had caused her. What could she say, what could she do, to reveal to them that enchantress in her true colours? But Bee knew that she could do nothing, and there began to rise in her heart a dreadful question, Was it so sure that she herself was right? Was this woman, indeed, an evil Fate, or was she, was she——? And the first story of all, the story of Aubrey, was it perhaps true?

The nurse came in noiselessly, hurrying, while Bee's mind ran through those thoughts—evidently with the conviction that she would find the patient worse. But Charlie

was not worse. He turned his face towards his attendant, still with something of that dreamy rapture in it.

“Oh, you may speak out,” he said; “I don’t mind noises to-night. Supper? Yes, I’ll take some supper. Bring me a beefsteak or something substantial. I’m going to get well at once.”

Nurse nodded at Bee, with much uplifting of her eyelids. “Put no faith in you,” she said, working the machinery of her lips; “was wrong; done him no end of good. Beefsteak; not exactly; but soon, soon, if you’re good.”

CHAPTER X.

BEE saw no more of Charlie that night. When she came out of his room, where there was a certain meaning in her presence, she seemed to pass into the region of dreams. She was taken upstairs to refresh herself and rest, into the smaller of two bedrooms which were over Charlie's room, the other of which was occupied by Mrs. Leigh. And she was taken downstairs to dine with that lady *tête-à-tête* at the small shining table. There was something about the little house altogether, a certain conciseness, an absence of drapery, and of the small elegant litter which is so general nowadays, which gave it a masculine character—or, at least, Bee, not accustomed to æsthetic young men, accustomed rather to big boys and their scorn of the decorative

arts, thought so with a curious flutter of her being. This perhaps was partly because the ornamental part of the house was devoted to Charlie, and the little dining-room below seemed the sole room to live in. It had one or two portraits hung on the walls, pictures almost too much for its small dimensions. The still smaller room behind was clothed with books, and had for its only ornament a small portrait of Mrs. Leigh over the mantel-piece. Whose rooms were these? Who had furnished them so gravely, and left behind an impression of serious character which almost chilled the heart of Bee? He was nowhere visible, nor any trace of him. No allusion was made as to an absent master of the house, and yet it bore an air so individual that Bee's sensitive being was moved by it, with all the might of something stranger than imagination. She stood trembling among the books, looking at the mother's portrait over the mantel-piece, feeling as if the very mantel-shelf on which she rested her arm was warm with the touch of his. But not a word was said, not an allusion made to Aubrey.

What had she to do with Aubrey? Nothing—less than with any other man in the world—any stranger to whom she could speak with freedom, interchanging the common coin of ordinary intercourse. He was the only man in the world whom she must not talk of, must not see—the only one of whose presence it was necessary to obliterate every sign, and never to utter the name where she was. Poor Bee! Yet she felt him near, his presence suggested by everything, his name always latent in the air. She slept and waked in that strange atmosphere as in a dream. In Aubrey's house, yet with Aubrey obliterated—the one person in existence with whom she had nothing, nothing to do.

It was late before she was allowed to see her brother next day, and Bee, in the meantime, left to her own devices, had not known what to do. She had taken pen and paper two or three times to let her father know that Charlie was found, but her mind revolted, somehow, from making that intimation. What would happen when he knew? He would come here immediately; he would

probably attempt to remove Charlie; he would certainly order Bee away at once from a place so unsuitable for her. It was unsuitable for her, and yet— She scarcely saw even Mrs. Leigh after breakfast, but was left to herself, with the door open into that sanctuary which was Aubrey's, with all his books and the newspapers laid out upon the table. Bee sat in the dining-room and looked into that other secluded place. In the light of day she dared not go into it. It seemed like thrusting herself into his presence who had no thought of her, who did not want her. Oh, not for Aubrey! Aubrey would not for the world disturb her, or bring any embarrassment into her mind. Aubrey would rather disappear from his own house, as if he had never existed, than remind her that he did exist, and perhaps sometimes thought of her still. Did he ever think of her? Bee knew that it would be wrong and unlike Aubrey if he kept in these rooms the poor little photograph of her almost childish face which he had once prized so much. It would have been indelicate, unlike a gentleman; and yet she made a hasty and furtive search every-

where to see if, perhaps, it might be somewhere, in some book or little frame. She would have been angry had she found it, and indignant; yet she felt a certain desolate sense of being altogether out of the question, steal into her heart, when she did not find it—in the inconsistencies of which the heart is full.

It was mid-day when she was called upstairs, to find Charlie established in the room which should have been the drawing-room, and round which she threw another wistful look as she came into it in full daylight. Oh, not a woman's room in any way, with none of those little photograph frames about which strew a woman's table—not one, and consequently none of Bee. She took this in at the first glance, as she made the three or four little steps between the door and Charlie's couch. He was more hollow-eyed and worn in the daylight than he had been even on the night before, his appearance entirely changed from that of the commonplace young Oxford man to an eager, anxious being, with all the cares of a troubled soul concentrated in his eyes. Mrs. Leigh sat

near him, and the nurse was busy with cushions and pillows arranging his couch.

“My dear, you will be thankful to hear that the doctor gives a very good report to-day. He says that, though he would not have sanctioned it, my remedy has done wonders. You are my remedy, Bee. I am proud of so successful an idea—though, to be sure, it was a very simple one. Now you must go on and complete the cure, and I give you *carte blanche*. Ask anyone here, anyone you please, so long as it is not too much for Charlie. He may see one or two people if nurse sanctions it. I am going out myself for the day. I shall not return till late in the afternoon, and you are mistress in the meantime—absolute mistress,” said Mrs. Leigh, kissing her. Bee felt that Aubrey’s mother would not even meet her eyes lest she should throw too much meaning into these words. Oh, there was no meaning in them, except so far as Charlie was concerned.

And then she was left alone with her brother, the most natural, the only suitable arrangement. Nurse gave the last pat to his

cushions, the last twist to the coverlet, which was over his gaunt limbs, appealed to him the last time in dumb show whether he wanted anything, and then withdrew. It was most natural that his sister, whose appearance had done him so much good, should be left with him as his nurse ; but she was frightened, and Charlie self-absorbed, and it was some time before either found a word to say. At last he said, "Bee!" calling her attention, and then was silent again for some time, speaking no more.

"Yes, Charlie!" There was a flutter in Bee's voice as in her heart.

"I say, I wasn't, perhaps, very nice to you last night ; I couldn't bear to be brought back ; but they say I'm twice as well since you came. So I am. I've got something to keep me up. Bee, look here. Am I dreadful to look at ? I know I haven't an ounce of flesh left on my bones, but some don't mind that ; and then, my beard. I've heard it said that a beard that never was shaved was—was—an embellishment, don't you know. Do you think I'm dreadful to look at, Bee?"

"Oh, Charlie," said the girl, from the

depths of her heart, "what does it matter how you look? The more ill you look the more need you have for your own people about you, who never would think twice of that."

Charlie's gaunt countenance was distorted with a grin of rage and annoyance. "I wish you'd shut up about my own people. The governor, perhaps, with his grand air, or Betty, as sharp as a needle—as if I wanted them!—or to be told that they would put up with me."

"Charlie," said Bee, trembling, "I don't want to vex you, you are a little—but couldn't you have a barber to come, and perhaps he could take it off."

There came a flash of fire out of Charlie's eyes; he put up his hand to his face, as if to protect that beard in which he at least believed—"I might have known," he said, "that you were the last person! A fellow's sister is always like that: just as we never think anything of a girl's looks in our own families. Well, you've given your opinion on that subject. And you think that people who care for me wouldn't think twice of that?"

“Oh, no,” said Bee, clasping her hands, “how should they? But only feel for you far, far more.”

Charlie took down his hand from his young beard. He looked at her with his hollow eyes full of anxiety, yet with a certain complacency. “Interesting?”—he said, “is that what you meant to say?”

“Oh, yes,” cried Bee, her eyes full of pity, “for they can see what you have gone through, and how much you have been suffering,—if there was any need of making you more interesting to us.”

Charlie stroked down his little tufts of wool for some time without speaking, and then he said in a caressing tone unusual to him, “I want you to do me a favour, Bee.”

“Anything—anything, whatever you wish, Charlie.”

“There is just one thing I wish, and one person I want to see. Sit down and write a note—you need not do more than say where I am,” said Charlie, speaking quickly. “Say I am here, and have been very ill, but that the hope she’d come, and to hear that she had forgiven me, was like new life. Well!

what is the meaning of your 'anything, anything,' if you break down at the first thing I ask you? Look here, Bee, if you wish me to live and get well you'll do what I say."

"Oh, Charlie, how can I?—how can I?—when you know what I feel—about——"

"What you feel—about? Who cares what you feel? You think perhaps it was you that did me all that good last night. That's all conceit, like the nonsense in novels, where a woman near your bed when you're ill makes all the difference. Girls," said Charlie, "are puffed up with that folly and believe anything. You know I didn't want you. It was what you told me about *her* that did me good. And your humbug, sitting there crying, 'anything, anything!' Well, here's something! You need not write a regular letter, if you don't like it. Put where I am—Charlie Kingsward very ill; will you come and see him? A telegram would do, and it would be quicker; send a telegram," he cried.

"Oh, Charlie!"

"Give me the paper and pencil—I'm shaky, but I can do that much myself——"

"Charlie, I'll do it rather than vex you ; but I don't know where to send it."

"Oh, I can tell you that—Avondale, near the Parks, Oxford."

"She is not there now—she is in London," said Bee, in a low tone.

"In London?" Again the long, gaunt limbs came to the ground with a thump. "Bee, if you could get me a hansom perhaps I could go."

The nurse at this moment came in noiselessly, and Charlie shrank before her. She put him back on the sofa with a swift movement. "If you go on like this I'll take the young lady away," she said.

"I'll not go on—I'll be as meek as Moses ; but, nurse, tell her she mustn't contradict a man in my state. She must do what I say."

Nurse turned her back upon the patient, and made the usual grimaces ; "Humour him," her lips and eyebrows said.

"Charlie, papa knows the address, and Betty—and I ought, oh, I ought to let them know at once that you are here."

"Betty!" he said, with a grimace, "what does that little thing know?"

“She knows—better than you think I do ; and papa—— Papa is never happy but when he is with that lady. He goes to see her every day ; she writes to him and he writes to her ; they go out together,” cried Bee, thinking of that invitation to Portman Square which had seemed the last insult which she could be called on to bear.

Charlie smiled—the same smile of ineffable self-complacence and confidence which had replaced in a moment the gloom of the previous night ; and then he grew grave. He was not such a fool, he said to himself, as to be jealous of his own father ; but still he grudged that anyone but himself should have her company. He remembered what it was to go to see her every day, to write to her, to have her letters, to be privileged to give her his arm now and then, to escort her here or there. If it had been another fellow ! But a man’s father—the governor ! He was not a rival. Charlie imagined to himself the conversations with him for their subject, and how, perhaps for the first time, the governor would learn to do him justice, seeing him through Laura’s eyes. It was true that she

had rejected him, had almost laughed at him, had sent him away so completely broken down and miserable that he had not cared what became of him. But hope had sprung within him, all the more wildly from that downfall. It was like her to go to the old gentleman (it was thus he considered his father) to explain everything, to set him right. She would not have done so if her heart had not relented—her heart was so kind. She must have felt what it was to drive a man to despair—and now she was working for him, soothing down the governor, bringing everything back.

“Eh?” he said, vaguely, some time after; he had in the meantime heard Bee’s voice going on vaguely addressing somebody, in the air, “are you speaking to me?”

“There is no one else to speak to,” cried Bee, almost angrily. And then she said, “Charlie—how can you ask her to come here?”

“Why not here? She’ll go anywhere to do a kind thing.”

“But not to this house—not here, not here!”

“Why not, I should like to know—what’s here?” Then Charlie stared at her for a moment with his hollow eyes, and broke into a low, feeble laugh.

“Oh,” he said, “I know what you’ve got in your head—because of that confounded cad, Aubrey Leigh? That is just why she will come, to show what a lie all that was—as if she ever would have looked twice at a fellow like Leigh.”

“He seems to have saved your life,” said Bee, confused, not knowing what to think.

“You mean he gave me house-room when I was ill, and sent for a doctor. Why, any shop-keeper would have done that. And now,” said Charlie, with a grin, “he shall be fully paid back.”

CHAPTER XI.

BETTY KINGSWARD lived in what was to her a whirl of pleasure at Portman Square, where everybody was fond of her, and all manner of entertainments were devised for her pleasure. And her correspondence was not usually of an exciting character. Her morning letters, when she had any, were placed by her plate on the breakfast-table. If any came by other posts, she got them when she had a spare moment to look for them, and she had scarcely a spare moment at this very lively and very happy moment of her young career. Besides, that particular evening when Bee's note arrived was a very important one to Betty. It was the evening on which Miss Lance was to dine with the

Lyons. And it was not a mere quiet family dinner, but a party—a thing which in her newness and inexperience still excited the little girl, who was not to say properly “out,” in consequence of her mourning; still wearing black ribbons with her white frocks, and only allowed to accept invitations which were “quiet.” A dinner of twenty people is not exactly an entertainment for a girl of her years, but Betty’s excitement in the *début* of Miss Lance was so great that no ball could have occupied her more. There was an unusual interest about it in the whole house, even Mrs. Lyon’s maid, the most staid of confidential persons, had begged Betty to point out to her over the baluster “the lady, Miss Betty, that is coming with your papa.”

“Oh, she’s not coming with papa,” Betty had cried, with a laugh at Hobbs’ mistake, “she is only a great, great friend, Hobbs. You will easily know her, for there is nobody else so handsome.”

“Handsome is as handsome does,” said the woman, and she patted Betty on the shoulder under pretence of arranging her ribbon.

Betty had not the least idea why Hobbs looked at her with such compassionate eyes.

Miss Lance, however, did come into the room, to Betty's surprise, closely followed by Colonel Kingsward, as if they had arrived together. She was like a picture, in her black satin and lace, dressed not too young but rather too *old* for her age, as Mrs. Lyon pointed out, who was as much excited about her new guest as Betty herself; and the unknown lady had the greatest possible success in a party which consisted chiefly, as Betty did not remark, of old friends of Colonel Kingsward, with whom she had been acquainted all her life. Betty did not remark it, but Gerald Lyon did, who was more than ever her comrade and companion in this elderly company.

"Why all these old togies?" he had asked irreverently, as the gentlemen with stars on their coats and the ladies in diamonds came in.

Betty perceived that it was an unusually solemn party, but thought no more of it. It was the evening of the first levee, and that, perhaps, was the reason why the old gentle-

men wore their orders. Old gentlemen! They were the flower of the British army. Generals This and That, heads of departments; impossible to imagine more grand people—in the flower of their age, like Colonel Kingsward. But eighteen has its own ideas very clearly marked on that subject. Betty and Gerald stood by, lighting up one corner with a blaze of undeniable youth, to see them come in. The young pair were like flowers in comparison with the substantial size and well worn complexions of their seniors, and they were the only little nobodies, the sole representatives of undistinguished and ordinary humanity round the table. They were not by any means daunted by that. On the contrary, they felt themselves, as it were, soaring over the heads of all those limited persons who had attained, spurning the level heights of realisation. They did not in the least know what was to become of them in life, but naturally they made light of the others who did know, who had done all they were likely to do, and had no more to look to. The dignity of accomplished success filled

the young ones with impulses of laughter ; their inferiority gave them an elevation over all the grizzled heads ; they felt themselves, nobodies, to be almost ludicrously, dizzily above the heads of the rest. Only one of the company seemed to see this, however ; to cast them an occasional look, even to make them the confidants of an occasional smile, a raising of the eyebrows, a sort of unspoken comment on the fine company, which made Betty still more lively in her criticisms. But this made almost a quarrel between the two.

“ Oh, I wish we were nearer to Miss Lance, to hear what she thinks of it all,” Betty said.

“ I can’t think what you see in that woman,” cried Gerald. “ I, for one, have no desire to know her opinion.”

Betty turned her little shoulder upon him with a glance of flame, that almost set the young man on fire.

“ You prejudiced, cynical, uncharitable, malicious, odious boy !” And they did not say another word to each other for five minutes by the clock.

Miss Lance, however, there was no doubt, had a distinguished success. She captivated the gentlemen who were next to her at table, and, what was perhaps more difficult, she made a favourable impression upon the ladies in the drawing-room. Her aspect there, indeed, was of the most attractive kind. She drew Betty's arm within her own, and said with a laugh, "You and I are the girls, little Betty, among all these grand married ladies ;" and then she added, "Isn't it a little absurd that we shouldn't have some title to ourselves, we old maids?—for Miss means eighteen, and it's hard that it should mean forty-two. Fancy the disappointment of hearing this juvenile title and then finding that it means a middle-aged woman."

She laughed so freely that some of the other ladies laughed too. The attention of all was directed towards the new comer, which Betty thought very natural, she was so much the handsomest of them all.

"You mean the disappointment of a gentleman?" said one of the guests.

"Oh, no, of ladies too. Don't you think women are just as fond of youth as men are,

and as much disgusted with an elderly face veiling itself in false pretences? Oh, more! We think more of beauty than the men do," said Miss Lance, raising her fine head as if to expose its features to the fire of all the glances bent upon her.

There was a little chorus of cries, "Oh, no, no," and arguments against so novel a view.

But Miss Lance did not quail; her own beauty was done full justice to. She was so placed that more than one mirror in the old-fashioned room reflected her graceful and not unstudied pose.

"I know it isn't a usual view," she said, "but if you'll think of it a little you'll find it's true. The common thing is to talk about women being jealous of each other. If we are it is because we are always the first to find out a beautiful face—and usually we much exaggerate its power."

"Do you know," said Mrs. Lyon in her quavering voice, "I almost think Miss Lance is right? Mr. Lyon instantly says 'Humph!' when I point out a pretty person to him. And Gerald tells me, 'You think every girl pretty, aunt.'"

“That is because there is one little girl that he thinks the most pretty of all,” said Miss Lance, with a sort of soft maternal coo in Betty’s ear.

The subject was taken up and tossed about from one to another, while she who had originated it drew back a little, listening with an air of much attention, turning her head to each speaker, an attitude which was most effective. It will probably be thought the greatest waste of effort for a woman thus to exhibit what the newspapers call her personal advantages to a group of her own sex ; but Miss Lance was a very clever woman, and she knew what she was about. After a time, when the first fervour of the argument was over, she returned to her first theme as to the appropriate title that ought to be invented for old maids.

“I have thought of it a great deal,” she said. “I should have called myself Mrs. Laura Lance, to discriminate—but for the American custom of calling all married ladies so, which is absurd.”

“I have a friend in New York who writes to me as Mrs. Mary Lyon,” said the mistress of the house.

“Yes, which is ridiculous, you know; for you are not Mrs. Mary Lyon, dear lady. You are Mrs. Francis Lyon, if it is necessary to have a Christian name, for Lyon is your husband’s name, not yours. You are Mrs. Mary Howard by rights—if in such a matter there are any rights.”

“What!” cried old Mr. Lyon, coming in after the long array of gentlemen, “are you going to divorce my wife from me, or give her another name, or what are you going to do? We thought it was we only who could change the ladies’ names, Kingsward, eh?”

Colonel Kingsward had placed himself immediately in front of Miss Lance, and Betty, looking on all unsuspecting, saw a glance pass between them—or rather, she saw Miss Lance look up into her father’s face. Betty did not know in the least what that look meant, but it gave her a little shock as if she had touched an electric battery. It meant something more than to Betty’s consciousness had ever been put into words. She turned her eyes away for a moment to escape the curious thrill that ran through her, and in that moment met Gerald Lyon’s eyes,

full of something malicious, mocking, disagreeable, which made Betty very angry. But she could not explain to herself what all these looks meant.

This curious sensation somehow spoiled the rest of the evening for Betty. Everybody it seemed to her after this meant something—something more than they said. They looked at her father, they looked at Miss Lance, they looked even at Betty's little self, embracing all three, sometimes in one comprehensive glance. And all kinds of significant little speeches were made as the company went away. "I am so glad to have seen her," one lady said in an undertone to Mrs. Lyon. "One regrets, of course, but one is thankful it is no worse." "I think," said another, "it will do very well—I think it will do very well; thank you for the opportunity." And "Charming, my dear Mrs. Lyon, charming," said another. They all spoke low and in the most confidential tone. What was it they were all so interested about?

The last of the party to go were Miss Lance and Colonel Kingsward. They

seemed to go away together as they had seemed to come together.

“Your father is so kind as to see me home,” Miss Lance said, by way of explanation. “I am not a grand lady with a carriage. I am old enough to walk home by myself, and I always do it, but as Colonel Kingsward is so kind, of course I like company best.”

She too had a private word with Mrs. Lyon, at the head of the stairs. Betty did not want to listen, but she heard by instinct the repeated “Thank you, thank you! How can I ever express how much I thank you?” Betty was so bewildered that she could not think. She paid no attention to her father, who put his hands on her shoulders when he said “Good-night,” and said, “Betty, I’ll see you to-morrow.” Oh, of course, she should see him to-morrow—or not, as circumstances might ordain. What did it matter? She was not anxious to see her father to-morrow, it could not be of the least importance whether they met or not; but what Betty would really have liked would have been to find out what all these little whisperings could mean.

Mrs. Lyon came up to her when the last, to wit, Colonel Kingsward following Miss Lance, had disappeared, and put her arms round the little girl. "You are looking a little tired," she said, "just this last hour. I did not think they would stay so late. It is all Miss Lance, I believe, setting us on to argue with her metaphysics. Well, everybody likes her very much, which will please you, my dear, as you are so fond of her. And now, Betty, you must run off to bed. There's hardly time for your beauty sleep."

"Mrs. Lyon," said Betty, very curious, "was it to meet Miss Lance that all those grand people came?"

"I don't know what you call grand people. They are all great friends of ours and also of your father's, and I think you know them every one. And they all know each other."

"Except Miss Lance," said Gerald, who was always disagreeable—always, when anyone mentioned Miss Lance's name.

"I know *her*, certainly, and better than any of them! And there is nobody so delightful," Betty cried, with fervour, partly because she believed what she said, and partly to be disagreeable in her turn to him.

“And so they all seemed to think,” said old Mr. Lyon, “though I’m not so fond of new people as the rest of you. Lay hands suddenly on no man is what I say.”

“And I say the same as my uncle,” said Gerald, “and it’s still more true of a woman than a man.”

“You are such an experienced person,” said the old lady; “they know so much better than we do, Betty. But never you mind, for your friend has made an excellent impression upon all these people—the most tremendously respectable people,” Mrs. Lyon said, “none of your artists and light-minded persons! Make yourself comfortable with that thought, and good night, my little Betty. You must not stay up so late another night.”

What nonsense that was of staying up late, when it was not yet twelve o’clock! But Betty went off to her room with a little confusion and bewilderment of mind, happy on the whole, but feeling as if she had something to think about when she should be alone. What was it she had to think about? She could not think what it was when she sat down alone to study her problem. There

was no problem, and what the departing guests had said to Mrs. Lyon was quite simple, and referred to something that was their own business, that had nothing to do with Betty. How could it have anything to do with Betty?

Around the corner of the Park, Bee, too, was sitting alone and thinking at the same time, and the two sets of thoughts, neither very clear, revolved round the same circle. But neither of the sisters knew, concerning this problem, whereabouts the other was.

CHAPTER XII.

AND yet all this time there lay upon Betty's table, concealed under the pretty laced handkerchiefs which she had pulled out of their sachet to choose one for the party, Bee's little tremulous letter, expressing a state of mind more agitated than that of Betty, and full of wonderings and trouble. It was found there by the maid who put things in order next morning, when she called the young visitor.

"Here's a letter that came last night, and you have never opened it," said the maid, half reproachfully. She, at least, she was anxious to note, had not been to blame.

Betty took it with great *sang froid*. She saw by the writing it was only Bee's—and

Bee's news was never imperative. There could not be much to disclose to her of the state of affairs at Kingswarden that was new, since the night before last.

But the result was that Betty went downstairs in her hat and gloves, and that Mr. Lyon and Gerald, who were both sitting down to that substantial breakfast which is the first symbol of good health and a good conscience in England, had much ado to detain her long enough to share that meal.

Mrs. Lyon did not come downstairs in the morning,⁷ so that they used the argument of helplessness, professing themselves unable to pour out their own tea.

"And what business can Betty have of such importance that she must run out without her breakfast?" said the old gentleman.

"Oh, it is news I have heard which I must take at once to papa!"

The two gentlemen looked at each other, and Mr. Lyon shook his big, old head.

"I would not trouble your papa, my dear, with anything you may have heard. Depend upon it, he will let you know anything he wishes you to know—in his own time."

“But it is news—news,” said Betty ; “news about Charlie !”

Then she remembered that very little had been said even to the Lyons about Charlie, and stopped with embarrassment, and her friends could not but believe that this was a hasty expedient to conceal from them that she had heard something—some flying rumour which had set her little impetuous being on fire. When she had escaped from their sympathetic looks and Gerald’s magnanimous proposal to accompany her—without so much as an egg to fortify him for the labours of the day!—Betty set out, crossing the Park in the early glory of the morning, which feels at nine o’clock what six o’clock feels in the country, to carry the news to her father.

Charlie found, and ill ; and demanding to see Miss Lance, his health and recovery depending upon whether he should see her or not ! Betty’s first instinct had been to hasten at once to George Street, Hanover Square, but then she remembered that papa presumably was the one who was most anxious about Charlie and had the best right to know, and it was perhaps better not to

explain to the friends in Portman Square why Miss Lance should go to Charlie. Indeed, when she had set out, a great many questions occurred to Betty, circulating through her lively little mind without any possibility of an answer to them. Why should Charlie be so anxious to see Miss Lance? Why had he been so long there, ill, and nobody come to tell his people of it? And what was Bee doing in Curzon Street, in Aubrey Leigh's house, which was the last house in the world where she had any right to be? But she walked so fast, and the sunny air with all its movement and lightness so carried her on and filled her with pleasant sounds and images, that these thoughts, blowing like the wind through her little intelligence, had not much effect on Betty now—though there was incipient trouble in them, as even she could see.

Colonel Kingsward was seated at his breakfast when his little girl burst in upon him in all the freshness of the morning. Her youth and her bloom, and her white frock, notwithstanding its black accoutrements, made a great show in the dark-coloured,

solemn, official-looking room, with its Turkey carpets and morocco chairs. The Colonel was evidently startled by the sight of her. He said, "Well?" in that tone of self-defence, and almost defiance, with which a man prepares for being called upon to give an account of himself; as if anything so absurd could be possible as that Betty, little Betty, could call upon her father to give an account of himself! But then it is very true that when there is something to be accounted for, the strongest feel how "conscience doth make cowards of us all."

"Oh," she cried, breathless, "Papa—Charlie! Bee has found Charlie, and he's been very ill—typhoid fever; he's getting better, and he's in London, and she's with him; and he wants but to see Miss Lance. Oh, papa, that's what I came about chiefly—he wants to see Miss Lance."

Colonel Kingsward's face changed many times during this breathless deliverance. He said first, "He's at Mackinnon's, I know;" then, "In London!" with no pleasure at all in his tone; and finally, "Miss Lance!" angrily, his face covered with a dark glow.

“What is all this?” he cried, when she stopped for want of breath. “Charlie—in town? You must be out of your senses. Why, he is in Scotland. I heard from—, eh? Well, I don’t know that I had any letter, but—. And ill—and Bee with him? What is the meaning of all this? Are you both mad, or in a conspiracy to make yourselves disagreeable to me?”

“Papa!” cried Betty, very ready to take up the challenge; but on the whole the news was too important to justify a combat of self-defence. She produced Bee’s note out of its envelope, and placed it before him, running on with a report of it while the Colonel groped for his eyeglass and arranged it upon his nose.

“A lady came and fetched her,” cried Betty, hurriedly, to forestall the reading, “and brought her up to town and took her to him—oh, so bad—where he had been for weeks; and she told him you had been to Oxford, and something about Miss Lance; and he wants to see Miss Lance, and calls and calls for her, and won’t be satisfied. Oh, papa!”

Colonel Kingsward had arranged his *pince-nez* very carefully ; he had taken up Bee's note, and went over it word by word while Betty made her breathless report. When he came to the first mention of Miss Lance he struck his hand upon the table like any other man in a passion, making all the cups and plates ring.

"The little fool!" he said, "the little fool! What right had she to bring in that name? It was this that called forth Betty's exclamation, but no more was said by either till he read it out to the end. Then he flung the letter from him, and getting up, paced about the room in rage and dismay.

"A long illness," said the Colonel, "was perhaps the best thing that could have happened to him to sweep all that had passed before out of his mind ; and here does this infernal little idiot, this little demon full of spite and malice, get at the boy at his worst moment and bring everything back. What right had she, the spiteful, envious little fool, to bring in the name of a lady—of a lady to whom you all owe the greatest respect?"

"Papa!" cried Betty, overwhelmed, "Bee couldn't have meant any harm."

Colonel Kingsward was out of himself and he uttered words which terrified his daughter, and which need not be recorded against him—for he certainly did not in cold blood wish Bee to fall under any celestial malediction. He stormed about the room, saying much that Betty could not understand ; that it was just the thing of all others that should not have happened, and the time of all others ; that if it had been a little later, or even a little earlier, it would not have mattered ; that it was enough to overturn every arrangement, increase every difficulty. He was not at all a man to give way to his feelings so. His children, indeed, until very lately, had never seen him excited at all, and it was an astonishment beyond description to little Betty to be a spectator of this scene. Indeed, Colonel Kingsward awoke presently to a sense of the self-exposure he had been making, and calmed down, or, at least, controlled himself, upon which Betty ventured to ask him very humbly what he thought she had better do.

“ May I go to Miss Lance and tell her ? She is not angry now, nor unhappy about

him like—like *us*,” said Betty, putting the best face upon it with instinctive capacity, “and she might know what to do. She is so very kind and understanding, don’t you know, papa?—and she would know what to do.”

For the first time Colonel Kingsward gave his agitated little visitor a smile. “You seem to have some understanding, too, for a little girl,” he said, “and it looks as if you would be worthy of my confidence, Betty. When I see you this afternoon I shall, perhaps, have something to tell you that——”

There came over Colonel Kingsward’s fine countenance a smile, a consciousness, which filled Betty with amaze. She had seen her father look handsome, commanding, very serious. She had seen him wear an air which the girls in their profanity had been used in their mother’s happy days to call that of the *père noble*. She had seen him angry, even in a passion, as to-day. She had heard him, alas! blaspheme, which had been very terrible to Betty. But she had never, she acknowledged to herself, seen him look *silly* before. Silly, in a girl’s phraseology, was

what he looked now, with that fatuity which is almost solely to be attributed to one cause ; but of this Betty was not aware. It came over his countenance, and for a moment Colonel Kingsward let himself go on the flood of complacent consciousness, which healed all his wounds. Then he suddenly braced himself up and turned to Betty again.

“ Perhaps,” he said, in his most fatherly tone, for it seemed to the man in this crisis of his life that even little Betty’s support was something to hold by, “ my dear child, your instinct is right. Go to Miss Lance and tell her how things are. Don’t take this odious letter, however,” he said, seizing Bee’s note and tearing it across with indignant vehemence, “ with all its prejudices and assumptions. Tell her in your own words ; and where they are—and—— Where are they, by the way ?” he said, groping for the fragments of the letter in his waste-paper basket. “ I hope you noted the address.”

He had not then, it was evident, noted the address, nor the name of Mrs. Leigh, nor in whose house Charlie was. Betty’s heart

beat high with the question whether she should call his attention to these additional facts, but her courage failed her. He had cooled down, he was himself again: and after a moment he added, "I will write a little note which you can take," with once more the smile that Betty thought silly floating across his face. She was standing close by the writing-table, and Betty was not aware that there was any harm in the natural glimpse which her keen eyes took, before she was conscious of it, of the note he was writing. It was not like a common note. It did not begin "Dear Miss Lance," as would have been natural. In short, it had no beginning at all, nor any signature—or rather it was signed only with his initial "F." How very extraordinary that papa should sign "F." and should not put any beginning to his letter. A kind of wondering consternation enveloped the little girl. But still she did not in the least understand what it meant.

Betty walked away along Pall Mall and Piccadilly, and by the edge of the Park to George Street, Hanover Square. It is not

according to the present fashion that a girl should shrink from walking along through those busy London streets, where nobody is in search of adventures, at least at that hour of the morning. Her white morning frock and her black ribbons, and her early bloom, like the morning, though delightful to behold, did not make all the passers by stand and stare as the movements of a pretty girl used to do, if we are to credit the novels, in the beginning of the century. People, perhaps, have too much to do nowadays to give to that not unusual sight the attention which the dandies and the macaroni bestowed upon it, and Betty was so evidently bent on her own little business, whatever it was, that nothing naturally occurred to detain her.

It was so unusual for her to have a grave piece of business in hand that she was a little elated by it, even though so sorry for Charlie who was so ill, and for Bee who was so perturbed about everything. Betty herself was not perturbed; she was full of the pleasure of the morning and the long, interesting walk, and the sense of her own importance as a messenger. If there did occasionally float

across her mind the idea that her father's demeanour was strange, or that it was odd that he should have signed his note to Miss Lance with an F., it was merely a momentary idea and she did not question it or detain it. And poor Charlie! Ill—not able to get out this fine weather; but he was getting better, so that there was really nothing to be troubled about.

Miss Lance was up, but had not yet appeared when Betty was shown into her little drawing-room. She was not an early riser. It was one of her vices, she frankly allowed. Betty had to wait, and had time to admire all her friend's knick-knacks, of which there were many, before she came in, which she did at last, with her arms put out to take Betty maternally to her bosom. She looked in the girl's face with a very intent glance before she took her into this embrace.

“My little Betty, so early,” she said, and kissed the girl, and then looked at her again, as if in expectation of something; but as Betty could not think of anything that Miss Lance would be expecting from her, she remained unconscious of any special meaning in this look.

"Yes, I am early," she said; "it is because I have something to tell you, and something to ask of you, too."

"Tell, my dear little girl, and ask. You may be sure I shall be at your service. But what is this in your hand—a note for me?"

"Yes, it is a note for you, but may I tell you first what it is about?" Betty went on quickly with her story, though Miss Lance, without waiting for it, took the note and opened it. "Miss Lance, Charlie is found; he has been very ill, and he wants to see you."

"To see me?" Miss Lance looked with eyes of sympathy, yet great innocence, as if at an impossible proposal, at the breathless girl so anxious to get it out. "But, Betty, if he is with your friends, the Mackinnons, in Scotland—?"

"Oh, Miss Lance, I told you he was not there, don't you remember? He has never been anywhere all this time. He has had typhoid fever, and on Thursday Bee was sent for, and found him still ill, but mending. And when he heard you were in town he would give her no peace till she wrote and

asked you to come and see him. And she did not know your address so she wrote to me. I went to tell papa first, and then I came on here. Oh, will you come and see Charlie? Bee said he wanted to get into a hansom and come to you as soon as he heard you were here."

"What induced them to talk of me, and why did she tell him I was here?" Miss Lance cried, with a momentary cloud upon her face, such as Betty had never seen there before. She sat down suddenly in a chair, with a pat of her foot upon the carpet, which was almost a stamp of impatience, and then she read Colonel Kingsward's note for the second time, with her brows drawn together and a blackness about her eyes which filled Betty with alarm and dismay. She looked up, however, next minute with her countenance cleared. "Your father says I am to use my own discretion," she said, with a half laugh; "that is not much help to me, is it, in deciding what is best to do? So he has been ill—and not in Scotland at all?"

"I told you he was not in Scotland," cried Betty, a little impatient in her turn. Oh,

Miss Lance, he has been ill, he is still ill, and won't you come and see him when he wants you so? Oh, come and see him, please! He looks so ill and wretched, Bee says, and weak, and cannot get back his strength; and he thinks if he could see you——”

“Poor boy—silly boy!” said Miss Lance; “why does he think it will do him good to see me? I doubt if it would do him any good; and your father says I am to use my discretion. I would do anything for any of you, Betty, but perhaps I should do him harm instead of good. Have you got your sister's letter?”

“I left it with papa—that is, he threw it into the waste paper basket,” said the too truthful Betty, growing red.

“I understand,” said Miss Lance, “it was not a letter to show me. Bee has her prejudices, and perhaps she is right. I cannot expect that all the family should be as nice to me as you. Have they taken him to Kingswarden? Or where is he, poor boy?”

“He is at No. 1000, Curzon Street,” Betty said.

“What!” said Miss Lance. “Where?” Her brow curved over her eyes, her face grew dark as if the light had gone out of the morning, and she spoke the two monosyllables in a sharp imperative tone, so that they seemed to cut like a knife.

“At No. 1000; Curzon Street,” Betty repeated with great alarm, not knowing what to think.

Miss Lance rose quickly, as if there had been something that stung her in the innocent words. She looked as if she were about to pace the room from end to end, as Colonel Kingsward did when he was disturbed. But either she did not mean this, or she restrained herself, for what she did was to walk to her writing-table and put Colonel Kingsward’s note away in a drawer, and then she went to the window and looked out, and said it was a fine morning but dusty for walking—and then she returned to her chair and sat down again and looked at Betty. She was pale, and there were lines in her face that had not been there before. Her eyes were almost piteous as she looked at the surprised girl.

“I am in a very strait place,” she said, “and I don’t know what to do.” Something like moisture seemed to come up into her eyes. “This is always how it happens to me,” she said, “just at the moment, just at the moment! What am I to do?”

CHAPTER XIII.

BEE had passed the whole day with Charlie, the Friday of the dinner party at Portman Square. She had resisted as long as she could writing the letter which had brought so much excitement to Betty, and the passion with which he had insisted upon this—the struggle between them, the vehemence with which he had declared that he cared for nothing in the world but to see Laura once again, to thank her for having pleaded for him with his father, to ask her forgiveness for his follies—had been bad for Charlie, who lay for the rest of the day upon the sofa, tossing from him one after the other the novels that were provided for his amusement, declaring them to be “rot” or “rubbish,”

growling at his sister when she continued to speak to him, and reducing poor Bee to that state of wounded imbecility which is the lot of those who endeavour to please an unpleasable invalid, with the conviction that all the time they are doing more harm than good.

Bee was not maladroit by nature, and she had the warmest desire to be serviceable to her brother, but it appeared that she always did the wrong thing, not only in the eyes of Charlie, but in those of the nurse, who came in from time to time with swift movements, bringing subordination and quiet where there had been nothing but irritation and resistance. And in this house, where she had been brought entirely for the service of Charlie, Bee did not know what to do. She was afraid to leave the rooms that had been given up to him lest she should meet someone on the stairs, or be seen only to be avoided, as if her presence there was that of a ghost or an enemy. Poor Bee—wearing out the long hours of the spring afternoon with poor attempts to be useful to the invalid, to watch his looks—which he resented by frequent

adjurations not to watch him as a cat watches a mouse—to anticipate his wishes—which immediately became the last thing in the world he wanted as soon as she found out the drink or got the paper for which he was looking, heard or thought she heard steps coming to the street door, subdued voices in the hall, comings and goings half stealthily, noises subdued lest she should hear. What did it matter whether she heard or not? Why should the master of the house be banished that she, so ineffectual as she had proved, should be brought to her brother's side? She had not done, and could not do, any good to Charlie. All that she had done had been to remind him of Miss Lance, to be the medium of calling that disastrous person, who had done all the harm, back into Charlie's life—nay, of bringing her back to this house, the inmates of which she had already harmed to the utmost of her power.

That was all that had been done by Bee, and now her presence kept at a distance the one individual in the world who had the best right to be here. He came almost secretly, she felt sure, to the door in the dusk to

inquire after his patient, or to get his letters ; or stole in, subduing his step, that she might not be disturbed.

Poor Bee ! It was very bitter to her to think that Aubrey Leigh should leave his own house because she was there. Sometimes she wondered whether it was some remnant of old, almost-extinguished feeling in his breast which had made him think that the sight of Bee would do Charlie good—the sight of Bee, for which her brother did not care at all, not at all ; which was an annoyance and a fatigue to him, except when she had betrayed what was the last thing in the world she should have betrayed, the possibility of seeing again that woman who had harmed them all. If Aubrey had thought so, with some remnant of the old romance, how mistaken he had been ! And it was intolerable for the girl to think that for the sake of this unsuccessful experiment he had been sent away from his own house. She placed herself in the corner of the room in which Charlie (to whom she was supposed to do good and bring pleasure) could see her least, and bitterness filled her heart. There were times

in which she thought of stealing away, leaving a word for Mrs. Leigh to the effect that she was doing Charlie no good, and that Betty, who would come to-morrow, might perhaps be of more use—and returning forlorn to Kingswarden to renew the life, where perhaps nobody wanted her very much, but where, at least, there were so many things which she and no one else was there to do.

She was still in this depressed state when Mrs. Leigh (who had evidently gone away that the brother and sister might be alone and happy together) came back, looking into Charlie's room to ask how he was on her way upstairs to dress for dinner.

“Better,” the nurse said, with her eyebrows. “Peevish—young lady mustn't cross him—must be humoured—things not gone quite so well to-day.”

“You will tell me about it at dinner,” said Mrs. Leigh, and Bee went downstairs with a heavy heart to be questioned. Aubrey's mother looked cheerful enough; she did not seem to be unhappy about his absence or to dislike the society of the girl who had driven him away. And she was very considerate even in her questions about the patient.

"We must expect these fluctuations," she said; "you must not be cast down if you are not quite so triumphantly successful to-day."

"Oh, Mrs. Leigh, I am deceiving you. I have never been successful at all. He did not want me—he doesn't care for me, and to stay here is dreadful, upsetting the house—doing no good."

"My dear, this is a strange statement to make, and you must not expect me to believe you in the face of facts. He was much better after seeing you last night."

"Doing no good," said Bee, shaking her head, "but harm, oh, real harm! It was not I that did him good, it was telling him of someone, of a lady. Oh, Mrs. Leigh, how am I to tell you?"

"My dear child, anything that you yourself know can surely be told to me. We were afraid that something about a woman was at the bottom of it, but then that is always the thing that is said, and typhoid, you know, means bad drains and not a troubled mind—though the one may make you susceptible to the other. Don't be so distressed, my dear. It seems more to your

inexperience than it is in reality. He will get over that."

"Mrs. Leigh," said Bee, very pale, "he has made me write to ask her to come and see him here."

It was now Mrs. Leigh's turn to change colour. She grew red, looking astonished in the girl's despairing face.

"A woman to come and see him, here! But your brother would never insult the house and you—— I am talking nonsense," she said, suddenly stopping herself, "and misconstruing him altogether. It is some lady who has jilted him—or something of that kind."

Bee had not understood what Mrs. Leigh's first idea was, and she did not see any cause for relief in the second.

"I don't know what she did to him, or what she has done to them all," the girl said, mournfully. "They are all the same. Papa, even, who does not care very much for ladies, generally—— But Charlie, poor Charlie! Oh, I believe he is in love with her still, though she is twice as old as he is and has almost broken his heart."

“My dear,” said Mrs. Leigh, “this must be something very different to what we thought. We thought he had got into some very dreadful trouble about a—an altogether inferior person. But as it seems to be a lady, and one that is known to the family, and who can be asked to come here—if you can tell me a little more clearly what the story is, I shall be more able to give you my advice.”

Bee looked at her questioner helpless, half distracted, not knowing how to speak, and yet the story must be told. She had written that fatal invitation, and it could not be concealed who this possible visitor was. She began with a great deal of hesitation to talk of the lady whom Charlie had raved about at Oxford, and how he was to work to please her ; and how he did not work, but failed in every way, and fled from Oxford ; and how her father went to inquire into the story ; and how the lady had come to Colonel Kingsward at the hotel, to explain to him, to excuse Charlie, to beg his father to forgive him.”

“But, my dear, she can't be so very bad,” said Mrs. Leigh, soothingly. “You must not judge her hardly ; if she thought she had

been to blame in the matter, that was really the right thing to do."

"And since then," resumed Bee, "I think papa has thought of nobody else; he writes to her and tells her everything. He goes to see her; he forgets about Charlie and all of us; he has taken Betty there, and Betty adores her too. And to-night," cried Bee, the angry tears coming into her eyes, "she is dining in Portman Square, dining with the Lyons as a great friend of ours—in Portman Square."

Mrs. Leigh drew Bee to her and gave her a kiss of consolation. I think it was partly that the girl in her misery should not see the smile, which Mrs. Leigh, thinking that she now saw through this not uncommon mystery, could not otherwise conceal.

"My poor child," she said, "my dear girl! This is hard upon you since you dislike her so much, but I am afraid it is quite natural, and a thing that could not have been guarded against. And then you must consider that your father may probably be a better judge than yourself. I don't see any harm this lady has done, except that perhaps it is not

quite good taste to make herself so agreeable both to the father and son ; but perhaps in Charlie's case that was not her fault. And I see no reason, my dear—really and sincerely as your friend, Bee—why you should be so prejudiced against a poor woman whose only fault is that everybody else likes her. Now isn't it a little unreasonable when you think of it calmly yourself?"

"Oh, Mrs. Leigh!" Bee cried. The situation was so intolerable, the passion of injury and misconception so strong in her that she could only gasp in insupportable anger and dismay.

"Bee! Bee! this feeling is natural but you must not let it carry you away. Have you seen her? Let me come in when she is here and give my opinion."

"I have seen her three times," said Bee, solemnly, "once at the Baths, and once at the Academy, and once at Oxford;" and then once more excitement mastered the girl. "Oh, when you know who she is! Don't smile, don't smile, but listen! She is Miss Lance."

"Miss Lance!" Mrs. Leigh repeated

the name with surprise, looking into Bee's face. "You must compose yourself," she said, "you must compose yourself. Miss——? My dear, you have got over excited, you have mixed things up."

"No, I am not over-excited! I am telling you only the truth. It is Miss Lance, and they all believe in her as if she were an angel, and she is coming here."

Mrs. Leigh was very much startled, but yet she would not believe her ears. She had heard Charlie delirious in his fever not so long ago. Her mind gave a little leap to the alarming thought that there might be madness in the family, and that Bee had been seized like her brother. That what she said was actual fact seemed to her too impossible to be true. She soothed the excited girl with all her power. "Whoever it is, my dear, you shall not take any harm. There is nothing to be frightened about. I will take care of you, whoever it is."

"I do not think you believe me," said Bee. "I am not out of my mind, as you think. It is Miss Lance—Miss Laura Lance—the same, the very same, that—and I have written, and she will be coming here."

"This is very strange," said Mrs. Leigh. "It does not seem possible to believe it. The same—who came between Aubrey and you? Oh, I never meant to name him, I was never to name him; but how can I help it? Laura, who was the trouble of his house—who would not leave him—who went to your father? And now your father! I cannot understand it. I cannot believe that it is true."

"It is true," said Bee. "But, Mrs. Leigh, you forget that no one cared then, except myself; they have forgotten all that now, they have forgotten what happened. It was only my business, it was not their business. All that has gone from papa; he remembers nothing about it. And she is a witch, she is a magician, she is a devil—oh, please forgive me, forgive me—I don't know what I am saying. It has all been growing, one thing after another—first me—and then Charlie—and then papa—and then Betty. And now, after bringing him almost to death and destruction, here is Charlie, in this house, calling for her, raging with me till I wrote to call her—me!" cried Bee, with a

sort of indignant eloquence. "Me! Could it go further than that? Could anything be more than that? Me!—and in this house."

"My dear child," said Mrs. Leigh, "I don't wonder, I don't wonder—it is like something in a tragedy. Oh, Bee! Forgive me for what is first in my thoughts. Was she the reason, the only reason, for your breach with my poor Aubrey? For at first you stood by him—and then you turned upon him."

"Do not ask me any more questions, please. I am not able to answer anything. Isn't it enough that all these things have happened through this woman, and that she is coming here?"

Mrs. Leigh made no further question. She saw that the girl's excitement was almost beyond her control, and that her young mind was strained to its utmost. She said, half to herself, "I must think. I cannot tell in a moment what to do. I must send for Aubrey. It is his duty and mine to let it go no further. You must try to compose yourself, my dear, and trust us. Oh, Bee," there were tears in her eyes as she came up to the girl and

kissed her, "if you could but have trusted us—in all things! I don't think you ever would have repented."

But Bee did not make any response. Her hands were cold and her head hot. She was wrapt in a strange passion and confusion of human chaos and bewilderment—everything gone wrong—all the elements of life twisted the perverse way; nothing open, nothing clear. She was incapable of any simple, unmingled feeling in that confusion and medley of everything going wrong.

Mrs. Leigh, a little disappointed, went into the inner room, the little library, to write a letter—no doubt to consult or summon her son—from which she was interrupted a few minutes later by a faint call, and Bee's white face in the doorway.

"Mrs. Leigh, papa will come to-morrow, and he will take us away; at least he will take me away. I—I shan't be any longer in anyone's way. Oh, don't keep him apart from you—don't send anyone out of the house because of me!"

CHAPTER XIV.

THERE was a great deal of commotion next morning in the house in Mayfair.

Bee was startled by having a tray brought to her bedroom with her breakfast when she was almost ready to go downstairs. “Mrs. Leigh thought, Miss, as you had been so tired last night, you might like to rest a little longer,” said the maid ; and Bee divined with a sharp pang through all the trouble and confusion of her mind that she was not wanted—that probably Aubrey was coming to consult with his mother what was to be done. It may be imagined with what scrupulousness she kept within her room, her pride all up in arms though her heart she thought was broken. Though the precaution was so natural, though it was taken at what was supposed to be her desire, at what was really

her desire—the only one she would have expressed—yet she resented it, in the contradiction and ferment of her being. If Mrs. Leigh supposed that she wanted to see Aubrey! He was nothing to her, he had no part in her life. When she had been brought here, against her will, it had been expressly explained that it was not for Aubrey, that he would rather go away to the end of the world than disturb her. And she had herself appealed to his mother—her last action on the previous night—to bring him back, not to banish him on account of the girl who was nothing to him, and whose part it was, not his, to go away. All this, however, did not make it seem less keen a wound to Bee that she should be, so to speak, imprisoned in her own room, because Aubrey was expected downstairs. She had never, she declared to herself vehemently, felt at ease under the roof that was his; nothing but Charlie's supposed want of her would have induced her to subject herself to the chances of meeting him, and the still more appalling chance of being supposed to wish to meet him. And now this insult of

imprisonment in her bedroom, lest she should by any chance come under his observation, offend his eye!—Bee was contradictory enough at all times, a rosebud set about with wilful thorns ; but everything was in tumult about her, and all her conditions nothing but contradictions now.

Thus it happened that while Betty was setting out with much excitement, but that all pleasurable, walking lightly among undiscovered dangers, Bee was suddenly arrested, as she felt, imprisoned in the little room looking out upon roofs and backs of houses, thrust aside into a corner that she might not be seen or her presence known—imperceptibly the force of the description grew as she went on piling up agony upon agony. It was some time before, in the commotion of her feelings, she could bring herself to swallow her tea, and then she walked about the room, gazed out of the window from which, as it was at the back of the house, she saw nothing, and found the position more and more intolerable every minute. A prisoner ! she who had been brought here against her will, on pretence that her presence might save her

brother's life, or something equally grandiose and impossible—save her brother's life, bring him back from despair by the sight of some one that he loved. These were the sort of words that Mrs. Leigh had said. As if it mattered to Charlie one way or the other what Bee might think or do! As if he were to be consoled by her, or stimulated, or brought back to life! She had affected him involuntarily, undesirably, by her betrayal of the vicinity of that woman, that witch, who had warped his heart and being. But as for influencing in her own person her brother's mind or life, Bee knew she was as little capable as baby, the little tyrant of the nursery. Oh! how foolish she had been to come at all, to yield to what was said, the flattering suggestion that she could do so much, when she knew all along in her inmost consciousness that she could do nothing! The only thing for her to do now was to go back to the dull life of which in her impatient foolishness she had grown so weary, the dull life in which she was indeed of some use after all, where it was clearly her duty to get the upper hand of baby, to preserve the

discipline of the nursery, to train the little ones, and keep the big boys in order, These were the elder sister's duties, with which nobody could interfere—not any ridiculous, sentimental, exaggerated idea, as Charlie had said, of what a woman's ministrations could do. “Oh, woman, in our hours of ease!” that sort of foolish, foolish, intolerable, ludicrous kind of thing, which it used to be considered right to say, though people knew better now. Bee felt bitterly that to say of her that she was a ministering angel would be irony, contumely, the sort of thing people said when they laughed at women and their old-fashioned sham pretences. She had never made any such pretence. She had said from the beginning that Charlie would care for none of her ministrations. She had been brought here against her judgment, against her will, and now she was shut up as in a prison in order that Aubrey might not be embarrassed by the sight of her! As if she had wished to see Aubrey! As if it had not been on the assurance that she was not to see Aubrey that she had been beguiled here!

When a message came to her that she was to go to her brother, Bee did not know what to do. It seemed to her that Aubrey might be lurking somewhere on the stairs, that he might be behind Charlie's sofa, or lying in wait on the other side of the curtain, notwithstanding her offence at the quite contradictory idea that she was imprisoned in her room to be kept out of his way. These two things were entirely contrary from each other, yet it was quite possible to entertain and be disturbed by both in the tumult and confusion of a perverse young mind. She stepped out of her room as if she were about to fall into an ambush, notwithstanding that she had been thrilling in every irritated nerve with the idea of being imprisoned there.

Charlie had insisted on getting up much earlier than usual. He had not waited for the doctor's visit. He was better; well, he said, stimulated into nervous strength and capability, though his gaunt limbs tottered under him and his thin hand trembled. When he got into his sitting-room he flung away all his cushions and wrappings as soon

as his nurse left him and went to the mirror over the mantel-piece and gazed at himself in the glass, smoothing down and stroking into their right place those irregular soft tufts growing here and there upon his chin, which he thought were the beginnings of a beard.

Would she think it was a beard, that sign of manhood? They were too downy, fluffy, unenergetic, a foolish kind of growth, like a colt's, some long, some short, yet Charlie could not help being proud of them. He felt that they would come to something in time, and remembered that he had often heard it said that a beard which never had been shaved became the finest—in time. Would she think so? or would she laugh and tell him that this would not do, that he must get himself shaved?

He would not mind that she should laugh. She might do anything, all she did was delightful to poor Charlie, and there would be a compliment even in being told that he must get shaved. Charlie had stroked his upper lip occasionally with a razor, but it had never been necessary to suggest to him that he should get shaved before.

He had to be put back upon his sofa when nurse re-appeared, but he only remained there for the time, promising no permanent obedience. When Laura came he certainly should not receive her there.

"When did your letter go? When would Betty receive it?" he said, when Bee, breathless and pale, at last, under nurse's escort, was brought downstairs.

"She must have got it last night. But there was a dinner party," said Bee, after a pause, "last night at Portman Square."

"What do I care for their dinner parties? I suppose the postman would go all the same."

"But Betty could not do anything till this morning."

"No," said Charlie, "I suppose not. She would be too much taken up with her ridiculous dress and what she was to wear"—the knowledge of a young man who had sisters, pierced through even his indignation—"or with some nonsense about Gerald Lyon—that fellow! And to think," he said, in an outburst of high, moral indignation "that one's fate should be at the mercy of a little thing like Betty, or what she might say or do!"

“ Betty is not so much younger than we are ; to be sure,” said Bee, with reflective sadness, “ she has never had anything to make her think of all the troubles that are in the world.”

Charlie turned upon her with scorn.

“ And what have you had to make you think, and what do you suppose you know ? A girl, always protected by everybody, kept out of the battle, never allowed to feel the air on your cheek ! I must tell you, Bee, that your setting yourself up for knowing things is the most ridiculous exhibition in the world.”

Bee’s wounded soul could not find any words. She kept out of the battle ! She setting up for knowing things ! And what was his knowledge in comparison with hers ? He had but been deluded like the rest by a woman whom Bee had always seen through, and never, never put any faith in ; whereas she had lost what was most dear, all her individual hopes and prospects, and been obliged to sacrifice what she knew would be the only love of her life.

She looked at Charlie with eyes that were

full of unutterable things. He was reckless with hope and expectation, self-deceived, thinking that all was coming right again; whereas Bee knew that things would never more be right with her. And yet he presumed to say that she knew nothing, and that to think she had suffered was a mere pretence! "How little. how little," Bee thought, "other people know."

The house seemed full that morning of sounds and commotions, unlike ordinary times. There were sounds of ringing bells, of doors opened and shut, of voices downstairs. Once both Charlie and Bee held their breath, thinking the moment had come, for a carriage stopped at the door, there was the sound of a noisy summons, and then steps coming upstairs.

Alas! it was nothing but the doctor, who came in, ushered by nurse, but not until she had held a private conference with him, keeping them both in the most tremendous suspense in the bedroom. It is true this was a thing which happened every morning, but they had both forgotten that in the tension of highly-wrought feeling,

And when the doctor came he shook his head. "There has been too much going on here," he said. "You have been doing too much or talking too much. Miss Kingsward, you helped us greatly with our patient yesterday, but I am afraid you have been going too far, you have hurried him too much. We dare not press recovery at railway speed after so serious an illness as this."

"Oh, I have not wished to do so," said Bee. "It is some friends that we are expecting."

"Friends? I never said he was to see friends," the doctor said.

"Come doctor," said Charlie, "you must not be too hard upon me. It's—it's my father and sister that are coming."

Your father and sister are different, but not too much even of them. Recollect, nurse, what I say, not too much even of the nearest and dearest. The machinery has been too much out of gear to come round all in a moment. And, Miss Kingsward, you are pale, too. You had better go out a little and take the air. There must not be too

much conversation, not too much reading either. I must have quiet, perfect quiet."

"Am I to do nothing but think?" said Charlie. "Is that the best thing for a fellow to do that has missed his schools and lost his time?"

"Be thankful that you are at a time of life when the loss of a few weeks doesn't matter, and don't think," said the doctor, "or we shall have to stop even the father and sister, and send you to bed again. Be reasonable, be reasonable. A few days' quiet and you will be out of my hands."

"Oh, Charlie, then you have given up seeing anyone else," said Bee, with a cry of relief as the doctor, attended by the nurse, went downstairs.

"I have done nothing of the kind," he cried, jumping up from the sofa and going to the window. "And you had better tell that woman to go out for a walk and that you will look after me. Do you think when Laura comes that I will not see her if fifty doctors were to interfere? But if you want to save me a little you will send that woman out of the way. It is the worry and being contradicted that does me harm."

“How can I, Charlie—oh, how can I, in the face of what the doctor said?”

He turned back upon her flaming with feverish rage and excitement.

“If you don’t I’ll go out. I’ll have a cab called, and get away from this prison,” he cried. “I don’t care what happens to me, but I shall see her if I die for it.”

“Perhaps,” said Bee to herself, trembling, “she will not come. Oh! perhaps she will not come!” But she felt that this was a very forlorn hope, and when the nurse came back the poor girl, faltering and ill at ease, obeyed the peremptory signs and frowns of Charlie, once more established on the sofa and seeming to take no part in the negotiation.

“Nurse, I have been thinking,” said Bee, with that talent for the circumstantial which women have, even when acting against their will, “that you have far more need of a walk and a little fresh air than I have, who have only been here for a day, and that if you will tell me exactly what to do, I could take care of him while you go out a little.”

“Shouldn’t think of leaving him,” said nurse, with her eyebrows working as usual

and a mocking smile about her lips. "Too much talk ; doctor not pleased."

"But if I promise not to talk ? I shall not talk. You don't want to talk, do you, Charlie ?"

Charlie launched a missile at her in his ingratitude, over his shoulder. "Not with you," he said.

"You hear ?" cried Bee, now intent upon gaining her point, and terrified lest other visitors might arrive before this matter were decided ; "we shall not talk, and I will do all you tell me. Oh, only tell me what I am to do."

"Nothing to do," said the nurse, not for the next hour ; nothing, but keep him quiet. Well, if you think you can undertake that, just for half an hour—"

"I will—I will—for as long as you please," cried Bee. It was better, indeed, if there must be this interview with Laura, that there should be as few spectators as possible. She hurried the woman away with eagerness, though she had been alarmed at the first suggestion. But when she was alone with him, and nobody to stand by her, thinking at

every sound she heard that this was the dreaded arrival, Bee crept close to him with a sudden panic of terror and dismay.

“Oh, Charlie, don’t listen to her, don’t believe her ; oh, don’t be led astray by her again ! I have done what you told me, but I oughtn’t to have done it. Oh, Charlie, stand fast, whatever she says, and don’t be led astray by her again.”

The only sign of Charlie’s gratitude that Bee received was to be hastily pushed away by his shoulder. “You little fool, what do you know about it ?” her brother said.

CHAPTER XV.

BUT the nurse went out for her walk and came in again and nothing happened, and Charlie had his invalid dinner, which in his excitement he could not eat, and Bee was called downstairs to luncheon, and yet nobody came. The luncheon was a terrible ordeal for Bee. She attempted to eat, with an eye on the window, to watch for the arrival of the visitors, and an ear upon the subdued sounds of the house, through which she seemed to hear the distant step, the distant voice of someone whose presence was not acknowledged. She repeated with eagerness her little speech of the night before. "Something must have detained papa," she said, "I cannot understand it, but he is sure to come, and he will take me away."

“I don’t want you to be taken away, my dear,” said Mrs. Leigh. “I should not let you go if I could help it.”

“Oh, but I must, I must,” said Bee, trembling and agitated. She could not eat anything, any more than Charlie, and when the nurse came downstairs, indignantly carrying the tray from which scarcely anything had been taken, Bee could make no reply to her remonstrances. “The young lady had better not come upstairs again,” said nurse; “she has done him more harm than good, he will have a relapse if we don’t mind. It is as much as my character is worth.” She talked like other people when there was no patient present, and she was genuinely afraid.

“What are we to do?” said Mrs. Leigh. “If this lady comes he ought not to see her! But perhaps she will not come.”

“That is what I have hoped,” said Bee, but if she doesn’t come he will go out, he will get to her somehow; he will kill himself with struggling——”

At the suggestion of going out the nurse gave a shriek and thrust her tray into the

servant's hands who was waiting. "He will have to kill me first," she said, rushing away.

And immediately upon this scene came Betty, fresh and shining in her white frock, with a smile like a little sunbeam, who announced at once that Miss Lance was coming.

"How is Charlie?" said Betty. "Oh, Mrs. Leigh, how good you have been! Papa is coming himself to thank you. What a trouble it must have been to have him ill here all the time. Mrs. Lyon, whom I am staying with, thinks it so wonderful of you—so kind, so kind! And Bee, *she* is coming, though it is rather a hard thing for her to do. She says you will not like to see her, Mrs. Leigh, and that it will be an intrusion upon you; but I said when you had been so good to poor Charlie all along, you would not be angry that she should come who is such a friend."

"Any friend, of course, of Colonel Kingsward's——" Mrs. Leigh said stiffly, while little Betty stared. She thought they all looked very strange; the old lady so stiff, and Bee turning red and turning white, and a

general air as if something had gone wrong.

"Is Charlie worse?" she said, with an anxious look.

And then Bee was suddenly called upstairs. "Can't manage him any longer," the nurse said on the landing. "I wash my hands of it. Your fault if he has a relapse."

"Who is that?" said Charlie, from within, "Who is it? I will see her! Nobody shall interfere, no one—doctor, or nurse, or—the devil himself. Bee!"

"It is only Betty," said Bee, upon which Charlie ceased his raging and flung himself again on his sofa.

"You want to torment me; you want to wear me out; you want to kill me," he said, with tears of keen disappointment in his eyes.

"Charlie," said Bee, "she is coming. Betty is here to say so; she is coming in about an hour or so. If you will eat your dinner and lie quite quiet and compose yourself you will be allowed to see her, and nurse will not object.

"Oh, Miss Kingsward, don't answer for me. It is as much as his life is worth."

“But not unless you eat your dinner and keep perfectly quiet.”

“Give us that old dinner,” said Charlie, with a loud, unsteady laugh, and the tray was brought back and he performed his duty upon the half-cold dishes with an expedition and exuberance that gave nurse new apprehensions.

“He’ll have indigestion,” she said, “if he gobbles like that,” speaking once more inaudibly over Charlie’s shoulder. But afterwards all was quiet till the fated moment came.

I do not think if these girls had known the feelings that were within Miss Lance’s breast that they would have been able to retain their respective feelings towards her—Betty of adoration or Bee of hostility. She had lived a life of adventure, and she had come already on various occasions to the very eve of such a settled condition of life as would have made further adventure unnecessary and impossible—but something had always come in the way. Something so often comes in the way of such a career. The stolid people who are incapable of any skilful com-

binations go on and prosper, while those who have wasted so much cleverness or much wit, so much trouble—and disturbed the lives of others and risked their own—fail just at the moment of success. I am sometimes very sorry for the poor adventurers. Miss Lance went to Curzon Street with all her wits painfully about her, knowing that she was about to stand for her life. It seemed the most extraordinary spite of fate that this should have happened in the house of Aubrey Leigh. She would have had in any case a disagreeable moment enough between Charlie Kingsward and his father, but it was too much to have the other brought in. The man whom she had so wronged, the family (for she knew that his mother was there also) who knew all about her, who could tell everything, and stop her on the very threshold of the new life—that new life in which there would be no equivocal circumstances, nothing that she could be reproached with, only duty and kindness. So often she seemed to have been just within sight of that halcyon spot where she would need to scheme no more, where duty

and every virtuous thing would be natural and easy. Was the failure to come all over again?

She was little more than an adventuress, this troubled woman, and yet it was not without something of the exalted feeling of one who is about to stand for his life, for emancipation and freedom to do well and all that is best in existence, that she walked through the streets towards her fate. Truth alone was possible with the Leighs, who knew everything about her past, and could not be persuaded or turned from their certainty by any explanations. But poor Charlie! Bare truth was not possible with him, whom she had sacrificed lightly to the amusement of the moment, whom she could never have married or made the instrument of building up her fortune except in the way which, to do her justice she had not foreseen, through the access he had given her to his father. How was she to satisfy that foolish, hot-headed boy?—and how to stop the mouths of the others in the background?—and how to persuade Colonel Kingsward that circumstances alone were

against her—that she herself was not to blame? She did not conceal from herself any of these difficulties, but she was too brave a woman to fly before them. She preferred to walk, and to walk alone, to this trial which awaited her, in order to subdue her nerves and get the aid of the fresh air and solitude to steady her being. She was going to stand for her life.

It seemed a good augury that she was allowed to enter the house without any interruption from the sitting-room below, where she had the conviction that her worst opponents were lying in wait. She thought even that she had been able to distinguish the white cap and shawl of Mrs. Leigh through the window, but it was Betty who met her in the hall—met her with a kiss and expression of delight.

“Oh, I am so glad you have come,” said Betty, “he is so eager to see you.” The people in ambush in the ground floor rooms must have heard the exclamation, but they made no sign. At the door upstairs they were met by the nurse, excited and laconic, speaking without any sound.

“No worry—don’t contradict. Much as life is worth,” she said, with emphatic, silent lips. Miss Lance, so composed, so perfect in her manner, so wound up to everything, laughed a little—she was so natural!—and nodded her head. And then she went in.

Charlie on the sofa was of course the chief figure. But he had jumped up, flinging his wrappings about, and stood in his gaunt and tremulous length, with his big hollow eyes and his ragged little beard, and his hands stretched out. “At last!” he said, “at last——Laura!” stumbling in his weakness as he advanced to her. Bee was standing up straight against the window in the furthest corner of the room, not making a movement. How real, how natural, how completely herself and ready for any emergency this visitor was! She took Charlie’s hands in hers, supporting him with that firm hold, and put him back upon his couch.

“Now,” she said, “the conditions of my visit are these: perfect quiet and obedience, and no excitement. If you rebel in any way I shall go. I know what nursing is, and I know what common-sense is—and I came

here to help you, not to harm you. Move a toe or finger more than you ought, and I shall go!"

"I will not move, not an eyelid if you tell me not. I want to do nothing but look at you. Laura! oh, Laura! I have been dead, and now I am alive again," Charlie said.

"Ill or well," said Miss Lance, arranging his cushions with great skill, "you are a foolish, absurd boy. Partly it belongs to your age and partly to your temperament. I should not have considered you like your father at the first glance, but you are like him. Now, perfect quiet. Consider that your grandmother has come to see you, and that it does not suit the old lady to have her mind disturbed."

"He had seized her hand and was kissing it over and over again. Miss Lance took those caresses very quietly, but after a minute she withdrew her hand. "Now, tell me all about it," she said; "you went off in such a commotion—so angry with me—"

"Never angry," he said, "but miserable, oh, more miserable—too miserable for words. I thought that you had cut me off for ever."

“You were right so far as your foolish ideas of that moment went, but I hope you have learnt better since, and now tell me what did you do? I hoped you had gone home, and then that you had gone to Scotland, and then—. What did you do?”

“I don’t know,” said Charlie, “I can’t tell you. I suppose I must have been ill then. I came up to town, but I don’t know what I did. And I was brought here, and I’ve been ill ever since, and couldn’t seem to get better until I heard you had been speaking for me. *You* speaking for me, Laura! Thinking of me a little, trying to bring me back to life. I’ll come back to life, dear, for you—anything, Laura, for you!”

“My dear boy, it is a pity you should not have a better reason,” she said. The two girls had not gone away. Betty had retired to the corner where Bee was, and they stood close together holding each other, ashamed and scornful beyond expression of Charlie’s abandonment. Even Betty, who was almost as much in love with Miss Lance as Charlie was, was ashamed to hear him “going on” in this ridiculous way. What Miss Lance

felt to have these words of devotion addressed to her in the presence of two such listeners I will not say. She was acutely sensible of their presence, and of what they were thinking, but she did not shrink from the ordeal. "And you must not call me Laura," she said, "unless you can make it Aunt Laura, or Grandmother Laura, which are titles I shouldn't object to. Anything else would be ridiculous between you and me."

"Laura!" the young man said, raising himself quickly.

"Say Aunt Laura, my dear, and if you move another inch I will go away!"

"You are crushing me," he cried, "you are driving me to despair!"

"Dear Charlie," said Miss Lance, "all this, you know, is very great nonsense—between you and me; I have told you so all along. Now things have really become too serious to go on. I want to be kind to you, to help you to get well, and to see as much of you as possible; for you are a dear boy and I am fond of you. But this can't be unless you will see things in their true light and acknowledge the real state of affairs. I am

most willing and ready to be your friend, to be a mother to you. But anything else is ridiculous. Do you hear me, Charlie?—ridiculous! You don't want to be laughed at, and you don't want me to be laughed at, I suppose?" She took his hands with which he had covered his face and held them in hers. "Now, no nonsense, Charlie. Be a man! Will you have me for your friend, always ready to do anything for you, or will you have nothing to do with me? Come! I might be your mother, I have always told you so. And look here," she said, with a tone of genuine passion in her voice and a half turn of her flexible figure towards the two girls, "I'm worth having for a mother; whatever you may think in your cruel youth, I am, I am!" Surely this was to them and not to him. The movement, the accent, was momentary. Her voice changed again into the softness of a caress. "Charlie, my dear boy, don't make me ridiculous, don't make people laugh at me. They call me an old witch, trying to entrap a young man. Will you let people—nay, will you *make* people call me so?"

"*I* make anyone call you—anything but

what you are!" he cried. "Nobody would dare," said the unfortunate fellow, "to do anything but revere you and admire you so long as I was there."

"And then break out laughing the moment your back was turned," she said. "'What a hold the old hag has got upon him!' is what they would say. And it would be quite true. Not that I am an old hag. No, I don't think I am that, I am worse. I'm a very well preserved woman of my years. I've taken great care of myself to keep up what are called my personal advantages. I have never wished—I don't wish now—to be thought older than I am, or ugly. I am just old enough—to be your mother, Charlie, if I had married young, as your mother did——"

He drew his hands out of her cool and firm grasp, and once more covered his face with them. "Don't torture me," he cried.

"No, my dear boy, I don't want to torture you, but you must not make me, nor yourself—whom I am proud of—ridiculous. I am going probably—for nothing is certain till it happens," she said, with a mournful tone in her voice, slightly shaking her head, "and you may perhaps help to balk me—I am

probably going to make a match with a reasonable person suited to my age."

Poor Charlie started up, his hands fell from his face, his large miserable eyes were fixed upon hers. "And you come—you come—to tell me this!" he cried.

"It will be partly for you—to show how impossible your folly is—but most for myself, to secure my own happiness." She said these words very slowly, one by one—"To secure my own happiness. Have I not the right to do that, because a young man, who should have been my son, has taken it into his foolish head to form other ideas of me? You would rather make me ridiculous and wretched than consider my dignity, my welfare, my happiness—and this is what you call love!" she said.

The girls listened to this conversation with feelings impossible to put into words, not knowing what to think. One of them loved the woman and the other hated her; they were equally overwhelmed in their young and simple ideas. She seemed to be speaking a language new to them, and to have risen into a region which they had never known.

CHAPTER XVI.

SHE left Charlie's room, having soothed him and reduced him to quiet in this inconceivable way, with a smile on her face and the look of one who was perfectly mistress of the situation. But when she had gone down half-a-dozen steps and reached the landing, she stood still and leaned against the wall, clasping her hands tight as if there was something in them to hold by. She had carried through this part of her ordeal with a high hand. She had made it look the kindest yet the most decisive interview in the world, crushing the foolish young heart, without remorse, yet tenderly, kindly, with such a force of sense and reason as could not be resisted—and all so naturally, with so much apparent ease, as if it cost her nothing. But she was after all, merely a woman,

and she knew that only half, nay, not half, not the worst half of her trial was over. She lay back against the wall, having nothing else to rest upon, and closed her eyes for a moment. The two girls had followed her instinctively out of Charlie's room, and stood on the stairs one above the other, gazing at her. The long lines of her figure seemed to relax, as if she might have fallen, and in their wonder and ignorance they might still have stood by and looked on letting her fall, without knowing what to do. But she did not do so. The corner of the walls supported her as if they had made a couch for her, and presently she opened her eyes with a vague smile at Betty, who was foremost. "I was tired," she said, and then, "it isn't easy"—drawing a long breath.

At this moment the trim figure of Mrs. Leigh's maid appeared on the stairs below, so commonplace, so trim, so neat, the little apparition of ordinary life which glides through every tragedy, lifting its everyday voice in announcements of dinner, in inquiries about tea, in all the nothings of routine, in the midst of all tumults of misery and

passion. "If you please, madam—my lady would be glad if you would step into the dining-room," she said.

Miss Lance raised herself in a moment from that half-recumbent position against the wall. She recovered herself, got back her colour and the brightness of her eyes, and that look of being perfectly natural, at her ease, unstrained, spontaneous, which she had shown throughout the interview with Charlie. "Certainly," she said. There did not seem to be time for the twinkling of an eyelid between the one mood and the other. She required no preparation or interval to pull herself together. She looked at the two sisters as if to call them to follow her, and then walked quietly downstairs to be tried for her life—like a martyr—oh, no, for she was not a martyr, but a criminal. She had no confidence of innocence about her. She knew what indictment was about to be brought against her, and she knew it was true. This knowledge, however, gives a certain strength. It gives courage such as the innocent who do not know what charge may be brought against them or how to

meet it, do not possess. She had rehearsed the scene. She knew what she was going to be accused of, and had thought over, and set in order, all the pleas. She knew exactly what she had done and what she had not, which was a tower of strength to her, and she knew that on her power of fighting it out depended her life. It is difficult altogether to deny our sympathy to a brave creature fighting for bare life. However guilty he may be, human nature takes sides with him, hopes in the face of all justice that there may be a loophole of escape. Even Bee, coming slowly downstairs after her, already thrown into a curious tumult of feeling by that scene in Charlie's room, began to feel her breath quicken with excitement even in the hostility of her heart.

There was one thing that Miss Lance had foreseen, and that burst upon her at once when the maid opened the door—Colonel Kingsward, standing with his arm upon the mantel-piece and his countenance as if turned to stone. The shock which this sight gave her was very difficult to overcome or conceal, it struck her with a sudden dart as of

despair ; her impulse was to fling down her arms, to acknowledge herself vanquished, and to retreat, a defeated and ruined adventuress, but she was too brave and unalterably by nature too sanguine to do this. She gave him a nod and a smile, to which he scarcely responded, as she went towards Mrs. Leigh.

“How strange,” she said, “when I come to see a new friend to find so old a friend ! I wondered if it could be Mr. Leigh’s house, but I was not sure—of the number.”

“I am afraid I cannot say I am glad to see you, Laura,” said Mrs. Leigh.

“No ? Perhaps it would have been too much to expect. We were, so to speak, on different sides. Poor Amy, I know, was never satisfactory to you, and I don’t wonder. Of course you only thought of me as her friend.”

“If that were all !” Mrs. Leigh said.

“Was there more than that ? May I sit down ? I have had a long walk, and rather an exhaustive interview—and I did not expect to be put on my trial. But it is always best to know what one is accused of.

I think it quite natural—quite natural that you should not like me, Mrs. Leigh. I was Amy's friend and she was trying to you. She put me in a very false position which I ought never to have accepted. But yet—I understand your attitude, and I submit to it with respect—but, pardon me—sincerely, I don't know what there was more."

Miss Lance had taken a chair, a perfectly upright one, on which few people could have sat gracefully. She made it evident that it was mere fatigue which made her subside upon it momentarily, and lifted her fine head and limpid eyes with so candid and respectful an air towards Mrs. Leigh's comfortable, unheroic face, that no contrast of the oppressed and oppressor could have been more marked. If anyone had suffered in the matter between these two ladies, it certainly was not the one with the rosy countenance and round, well-filled-out figure; or so, at least, any impartial observer certainly would have felt.

Mrs. Leigh, for her part, was almost speechless with excitement and anger. She had intended to keep perfectly calm, but the

look, the tone, the appearance of this personage altogether, brought before her overpoweringly many past scenes—scenes in which, to tell the truth, Miss Lance had not been always in the wrong, in which the other figure, now altogether disappeared, of Aubrey's wife was the foremost, an immovable gentle-mannered fool, with whom all reason and argument were unavailing, whom everybody had believed to be inspired by the companion to whom she clung. All Amy's faults had been bound upon Laura's shoulders, but this was not altogether deserved, and Miss Lance did not shrink from anything that could be said on that subject. It required more courage to say, "Was there anything more?"

"More!" cried Mrs. Leigh, choking with the remembrance. "More! My boy's house was made unsafe for him, it was made miserable to him, he was involved in every kind of danger and scandal, and she asks me if there was more?"

"Poor Amy," said Miss Lance, with a little pause on the name, shaking her head gently in compassion and regret. "Poor

Amy put me in a very false position. I have already said so, I ought not to have accepted it, I ought not to have promised ; but it was so difficult to refuse a promise to the dying. Let Colonel Kingsward judge. She was very unwise, but she had been my friend from infancy and clung to me more, much more than I wished. She exacted a promise from me on her death-bed that I would never leave her child—which was folly, and, perhaps more than folly, so far, at least, as I was concerned. You may imagine, Colonel Kingsward,” she added, steadfastly regarding him. He had kept his head turned away, not looking at her, but this gaze compelled him against his will to shift his position, to turn towards the appellant who made him the judge. He still kept his eyes away, but his head turned by an attraction which he could not withstand. “You may imagine, Colonel Kingsward—that I was the person who suffered most,” Miss Lance said after that pause, “compelled to stay in a house where I had never been welcome, except to poor Amy, who was dead ; a sort of guardian, a sort of nurse,

and yet with none of their rights, held fast by a promise which I had given against my will, and which I never ceased to regret. You are a man, Colonel Kingsward, but you have more understanding of a woman's feelings than any I know. My position was a false one, it was cruel—but I was bound by my word."

"No one ought to have given such a promise," he said, coldly, with averted eyes.

"You are always right, I ought not to have done so; but she was dying, and I was fond of her, poor girl, though she was foolish—it is not always the wisest people one loves most—fond of her, very fond of her, and of her poor little child."

The tears came to Miss Lance's eyes. She shook her head a little as if to shake them from her eyelashes. "Why should I cry? They have been so long happy, happier far than we——"

Mrs. Leigh, the prosecutor, the accuser, gave a gulp, a sob; the child was her grandchild, her only one—and besides anger in a woman is as prone to tears as sorrow. She gave a stifled cry, "I don't deny you were

good to the child ; oh, Laura, I could have forgiven you everything ! But not—not——”

“ What ? ” Miss Lance said.

Mrs. Leigh seized upon Bee by the arm and drew her forward—Aubrey’s mother wanted words, she wanted eloquence, her arguments had to be pointed by fact. She took Bee, who had been standing in proud yet excited spectatorship, and held her by her own side. “ Aubrey,” she said, almost inarticulately, and stopped to recover her breath—“ Aubrey—whom you had driven from his home—found at last this dear girl, this nice, good girl, who would have made him a new life. But you interfered, you wrote to her father, you went—I don’t know what you did—and said you had a claim, a prior claim. If you appeal to Colonel Kingsward, he is the best judge. You went to him——”

“ Not to me, I was not aware, I never even saw Miss Lance till long after ; forgive me for interrupting you.”

Miss Lance turned towards him again with that full look of faith and confidence. “ Always just ! ” she said. And this time for

a tremulous moment their eyes met. He turned his away again hastily, but he had received that touch ; an indefinable wavering came over his aspect of iron.

"Yes," she said, "I do not deny it—it is quite true. Shall I now explain before every one who is here? I think," she added, after a moment, "that my little Betty, who has nothing particular to do with it, may run away."

"I!" said Betty, clinging to the back of a chair.

"Go," said her father, impatiently, "go!"

"Yes, my dear, run away. Charlie must want some one. He will have got over me a little, and he will want some one. Dear little Betty, run away!"

Miss Lance rose from her seat—probably that too was a relief to her—and, with a smile and a kiss, turned Betty out of the room. She came back then and sat down again. It gained a little time, and she was at a crisis harder than she had ever faced before. She had gained a moment to think, but even now she was not sure what way there was out of this strait, the most momentous in which she

had ever been. She looked round her at one after another with a look that seemed as secure and confident, as easy and natural, as before; but her brain was working at the most tremendous rate, looking for some clue, some indication. She looked round as with a pause of conscious power, and then her gaze fixed itself on Bee. Bee stood near Mrs. Leigh's chair. She was standing firm but tremulous, a deeply concerned spectator, but there was on her face nothing of the eager attention with which a girl would listen to an explanation about her lover. She was not more interested than she had been before, not so much so as when Charlie was in question. When Mrs. Leigh, in her indictment, said, "You interfered," Bee had made a faint, almost imperceptible movement of her head. The mind works very quickly when its fate hangs on the balance of a minute, and now, suddenly, the culprit arraigned before these terrible judges saw her way.

"I interfered," Miss Lance said, slowly, "but not because of any prior claim;"—she paused again for a moment—"that would

have been as absurd as in the case Colonel Kingsward knows of. I interfered—because I had other reasons for believing that Aubrey Leigh was not the man to marry a dear, good, nice girl.”

“You had—other reasons, Laura! Mind what you are saying—you will have to prove your words,” cried Mrs. Leigh, rising in her wrath, with an astonished and threatening face.

“I do not ask his mother to believe me. It is before Colonel Kingsward,” said Miss Lance, “that I stand or fall.”

“Colonel Kingsward, make her speak out! You know it was because she claimed my son—she, a woman twice his age; and now she pretends— — Make her speak out! How dare you? You said he had promised to marry you—that he was bound to you. Colonel Kingsward, make her speak out!”

“That was what I understood,” he said, looking out of the window, his head turned half towards the other speakers, but not venturing to look at them. “I did not see Miss Lance, but that was what I understood.”

Laura sat firm, as if she were made of

marble, but almost as pale. Her nerves were so highly strung that if she had for a moment relaxed their tension, she would have fallen to the ground. She sat like a rock, holding herself together with the strong grasp of her clasped hands.

“You hear, you hear! You are convicted out of your own mouth. Oh, you are cruel, you are wicked, Laura Lance! If you have anything to say speak out, speak out!”

“I will say nothing,” said Miss Lance. “I will leave another, a better witness, to say it for me. Colonel Kingsward, ask your daughter if it was because of my prior claim, as his mother calls it, that she broke off her engagement with Aubrey Leigh.”

Colonel Kingsward turned, surprised, to his daughter, who, roused by the sound of her own name, looked up quickly—first at the seemingly composed and serious woman opposite to her, then at her father. He spoke to her angrily, abruptly.

“Do you hear? Answer the question that is put to you. Was it because of this lady, or any claim of hers, that you—how shall I say it?—a girl like you had no right

to decide one way or the other—that you broke off—that your mind was changed towards Mr. Aubrey Leigh?”

It appeared to Bee suddenly as if she had become the culprit, and all eyes were fixed on her. She trembled, looking at them all. What had she done? She was surely unhappy enough, wretched enough, a clandestine visitor, keeping Aubrey out of his own house, and what had she to do with Aubrey? Nothing, nothing! Nor he with her—that her heart should now be snatched out of her bosom publicly in respect to him.

“That is long past,” she said, faltering, “it is an old story. Mr. Aubrey Leigh is—a stranger to me; it is of no consequence—now!”

“Bee,” her father thundered at her, “answer the question! Was it because of—this lady that you changed your mind?”

Colonel Kingsward had always the art, somehow, of kindling the blaze of opposition in the blue eyes which were so like his own. She looked at him almost fiercely in reply, fully roused.

“No!” she said, “no! It was not because

of—that lady. It was another—reason of my own.”

“What was your reason?” cried Mrs. Leigh. “Oh, Bee, speak! What was it, what was it? Tell me, tell me, my dear, what was your reason? that I may prove to you it was not true.”

“Had it anything to do with—this lady?” asked Colonel Kingsward once more.

“I never spoke to that lady but once,” cried Bee, almost violently. “I don’t know her; I don’t want to know her. She has nothing to do with it. It was because of something quite different, something that we heard—I—and mamma.”

Miss Lance looked at him with a smile on her face, loosing the grip of her hands, spreading them out in demonstration of her acquittal. She rose up slowly, her beautiful eyes filled with tears. She allowed it to be seen for the first time how she was shaken with emotion.

“You have heard,” she said, “a witness you trust more than me—if I put myself into the breach to secure a pause, it was only such a piece of folly as I have done before. I

hope now that you will let me withdraw. I am dreadfully tired, I am not fit for any more."

She looked with that appeal upon her face, first at one of her judges, then at the other. "If you are satisfied, let me go." It seemed as if she could not say a word more. They made no response, but she did not wait for that. "I take it for granted," she added, "that by that child's mouth I am cleared," and then she turned towards the door.

Colonel Kingsward, with a little start, came from his place by the mantel-piece and opened it for her, as he would have done for any woman. She let it appear that this movement was unexpected, and went to her heart; she paused a moment looking up at him—her eyes swimming in tears, her mouth quivering.

"How kind you are!" she said, "even though you don't believe in me any more! but I have done all I can. I am very tired, scarcely able to walk." He stood rigid, and made no sign, and she, looking at him, softly shook her head—"Let me see you at least once," she said, very low, in a pleading tone, "this evening, some time?"

Still he gave no answer, standing like a man of iron, holding the door open. She gave him another look, and then walked quietly, but with a slight quiver and half stumble, away. They all stood watching until her tall figure was seen to pass the window, disappearing in the street, which is the outer world.

“Colonel Kingsward—” said Mrs. Leigh.

He started at the sound of his name, as if he had but just awakened out of a dream, and began to smooth his hat, which all this time he had held in his hands.

“Excuse me,” he said, excuse me, another time. I have some pressing business to see to now.”

And he, too, disappeared into that street which led both ways, into the monotony of London, which is the world.

CHAPTER XVII.

THOSE who were left behind were not very careful of what Colonel Kingsward did. They were not thinking of his concerns ; in the strain of personal feeling the most generous of human creatures is forced to think first of their own. Neither of the women who were left in the room had any time to consider the matter, but if they had they would have made sure without hesitation that nothing which could happen to Colonel Kingsward could be half so important as that crisis in which his daughter was involved.

Mrs. Leigh turned round upon the girl by her side and seized her hands. “ Bee,” she cried, “ now we are alone and we can speak

freely. Tell me what it was, there is nobody here to frighten you, to take the words from your mouth. What was it, what was it that made you turn from Aubrey? At last, at last, it can be cleared up whatever it was."

Bee turned away, trying to disengage her hands. "It is of no consequence," she said, "Oh, don't make me go back to those old, old things. What does it matter to Mr. Leigh? And as for me——"

"It matters everything to Aubrey. He will be able to clear himself if you will give him the chance. How could he clear himself when he was never allowed to speak, when he did not know? Bee, in justice, in mere justice! What was it? You said your mother——"

"Yes, I had her then. We heard it together, and she felt it like me. But we had no time to talk of it after, for she was ill. If you would please not ask me, Mrs. Leigh! I was very miserable—mother dying, and nowhere, nowhere in all the world anything to trust to. Don't, oh! don't make me go back upon it! I am not—so very—happy, even now!"

The girl would not let herself be drawn into Mrs. Leigh's arms. She refused to rest her head upon the warm and ample bosom which was offered to her. She drew away her hands. It was difficult, very difficult, to keep from crying. It is always hard for a girl to keep from crying when her being is so moved. The only chance for her was to keep apart from all contact, to stand by herself and persuade herself that nobody cared and that she was alone in the world.

"Bee, I believe," said Mrs. Leigh, solemnly, "that you have but to speak a word and you will be happy. You have not your mother now. You can't turn to her and ask her what you should do. But I am sure that she would say, 'speak!' If she were here she would not let you break a man's heart and spoil his life for a punctilio. I have always heard she was a good woman and kind—kind. Bee," the elder lady laid her hand suddenly on the girl's shoulder, making her start, "she would say 'speak' if she were here."

"Oh, mamma, if you were here!" said Bee, through her tears.

She broke down altogether and became inarticulate, sobbing with her face buried in her hands. The ordeal of the last two days had been severe. Charlie and his concerns and the appearance of Miss Lance, and the conflict only half understood which had been going on round her, had excited and disturbed her beyond expression, as everybody could see and understand. But, indeed, these were but secondary elements in the storm which had overwhelmed Bee, which was chiefly brought back by that sudden plunge into the atmosphere of Aubrey. The sensation of being in his house, which she might in other circumstances have shared with him, of sitting at his table, in his seat, under the roof that habitually sheltered him—here, where her own life ought to have been passed, but where the first condition now was that there should be nothing of him visible. In Aubrey's house, but not for Aubrey! Aubrey banished, lest perhaps her eyes might fall upon him by chance, or her ears be offended by the sound of his voice! Even his mother did not understand how much this had to do with the passion and trouble of the girl, from

whose eyes the innocent name of her mother, sweetest though saddest of memories, had let forth the salt and boiling tears. If Mrs. Leigh had been anybody in the world save Aubrey's mother, Bee would have clung to her, accepting the tender support and consolation of the elder women's arms and her sympathy, but from Aubrey's mother she felt herself compelled to keep apart.

It was not until her almost convulsive sobbing was over that this question could be re-opened, and in the meantime Betty having heard the sound of the closing door came rushing downstairs and burst into the room : perhaps she was not so much disturbed or excited as Mrs. Leigh was by Bee's condition. She gave her sister a kiss as she lay on the sofa where Mrs. Leigh had placed her, and patted her on the shoulder.

"She will be better when she has had it out," said Betty. "She has worked herself up into such a state about Miss Lance. And oh, please tell me what has happened. You are her enemy, too, Mrs. Leigh—oh, how can you misjudge her so ! As if she had been the cause of any harm ! I was sent away,"

said Betty, "and, of course, Bee could not speak—but I could have told you. Yes, of course, I knew! How could I help knowing, being her sister? I can't tell whether she told me, I knew without telling; and, of course, she must have told me. This is how it was——"

Bee put forth her hand and caught her sister by the dress, but Betty was not so easily stopped. She turned round quickly, and took the detaining hand into her own and patted and caressed it.

"It is far better to speak out," she said, "it must be told now, and though I am young and you call me little Betty, I cannot help hearing, can I, what people say? Mrs. Leigh, this was how it was. Whatever happened about dear Miss Lance—whom I shall stick to and believe in whatever you say," cried Betty, by way of an interlude, with flashing eyes, "that had nothing, nothing to do with it. That was a story—like Charlie's, I suppose, and Bee no more made a fuss about it than I should do. It was after, when Bee was standing by Aubrey, like—like Joan of Arc; yes, of

course I shall call him Aubrey—I should like to have him for a brother, but that has got nothing to do with it. A lady came to call upon mamma, and she told a story about someone on the railway who had met Aubrey on the way home after that scene at Cologne, after he was engaged to Bee, and was miserable because of papa's opposition." Betty spoke so fast that her words tumbled over each other, so to speak, in the rush for utterance. "Well, he was seen," she resumed, pausing for breath, "putting a young woman with children into one of the sleeping carriages—a poor young woman that had no money or right to be there. He put her in, and when they got to London he was seen talking to her, and giving her money, as if she belonged to him. I don't see any harm in that, for he was always kind to poor people. But these ladies did, and I suppose so did mamma, and Bee blazed up. That is just like her. She takes fire, she never waits to ask questions, she stops her ears. She thought it was something dreadful, showing that he had never cared for her, that he had cared for other people even when he was pretending,

I should have done quite different. I should have said, "Now, look here, Aubrey, what does it mean?"—or, rather, I should never have thought anything but that he was kind. He was always kind—silly, indeed, about poor people, as so many are."

Mrs. Leigh had followed Betty's rapid narrative with as much attention as she could concentrate upon it, but the speed with which the words flew forth, the little interruptions, the expressions of Betty's matured and wise opinions, bewildered her beyond measure.

"What does it all mean?" she asked, looking from one to another when the story was done. "A sleeping carriage on the railway—a woman with children—as if she belonged to him? How could a woman with children belong to him?" Then she paused and grew crimson with an old woman's painful blush. "Is it vice, horrible vulgar vice, this child is attributing to my boy?"

The two girls stared, confused and troubled. Bee got up from the sofa and put her hands to her head, her eyes fixed upon Mrs. Leigh with an appalled and horrified

look. She had not asked herself of what Aubrey had been accused. She had fled from him before the dreadful thought of relationships she did not understand, of something which was the last insult to her, whatever it might be in itself. "Vulgar vice!" The girls were cowed as if some guilt had been imputed to themselves.

"You are not like anything I have known, you girls of the period," cried the angry mother. "You are acquainted with such things as I at my age had never heard of. You make accusations! But now—he shall answer for himself," she said, flaming with righteous wrath. Mrs. Leigh went to the bell and rang it so violently that the sound echoed all over the house.

"Go and ask your master to come here at once, directly; I want him this moment," she said, stamping her foot in her impatience. And then there was a pause. The man went off and was seen from the window to cross the street on his errand. Then Bee rose, her tears hastily dried up, pushing back from her forehead her disordered hair.

"I had better go. If you have sent for Mr. Leigh it will be better that I should go."

Mrs. Leigh was almost incapable of speech. She took Bee by the shoulders and put her back almost violently on the sofa. "You shall stay there," she said, in a choked and angry voice.

What a horrible pause it was! The girls were silent, looking at each other with wild alarm. Betty, who had blurted out the story, but to whom the idea of repeating it before Aubrey—before a man—was unspeakable horror, made a step towards the door. Then she said, "No, I will not run away," with tremendous courage. "It is not our fault," she added, after a pause. "Bee, if I have got to say it again, give me your hand."

"It is I who ought to say it," said Bee, pale with the horror of what was to come. "Vulgar vice!" And she to accuse him, and to stand up before the world and say that was why!

It seemed a long time, but it was really only a few minutes, before Aubrey appeared. He came in quickly, breathless with haste and suspense. He expected, from what his mother had told him, to find Miss Lance and Colonel Kingsward there. He came into

the agitated room and found, of all people in the world, Bee and Betty, terrified, and his mother, walking about the room sounding, as it were, a metaphorical lash about their ears, in the frank passion of an elder woman who has the most just cause of offence and no reason to bate her breath. There was something humorous in the tragic situation, but to them it was wholly tragic, and Aubrey, seeing for the first time after so long an interval the girl he loved, and seeing her in such strange circumstances, was by no means disposed to see any humorous side.

“Here, Aubrey!” said his mother, “I have called upon you to hear what you are accused of. You thought it was Laura Lance, but she has nothing to do with it. You are accused of travelling from Germany, that time when you were sent off from Cologne—the time those Kingswards turned upon you”—(the girls both started, and recovered themselves a little at the shock of this contemptuous description),—“travelling in sleeping carriages and I know not what with a woman and children, who were believed to belong to you! What have you to say?”

"That was not what I said, Mrs. Leigh."

"What have you to say?" cried Mrs. Leigh, waving her hand to silence Betty; "the accused has surely the right to speak first."

"What have I to say? But to what, mother? What is it? Was I travelling with a woman and children? I suppose I was travelling—with all the women and children that were in the same train. But otherwise, of course you know I was with nobody. What does it mean?"

Bee got up from the sofa like a ghost, her blue eyes wild, her face pale. "Oh, let us go, let us go! Do not torment us," she said. "I will acknowledge that it was not true. Now that I see him I am sure that it was not true. I was mad. I was so stung to think—— Mrs. Leigh, do not kill me! I did him no harm; do not, do not go over it any more!"

"Go over what?" cried Aubrey. "Bee! She can't stand, she doesn't see where she is going. Mother, what on earth does it matter what was against me if it is all over? Mother! How dare you torture my poor girl—?"

This was naturally all the thanks Mrs. Leigh got for her efforts to unravel the mystery, which the reader knows was the most innocent mystery, and which had never been cleared up or thought of since that day. It came clear of itself the moment that Aubrey, only to support her, took Bee into his arms.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE SORCERESS walked away very slowly down the street.

She had the sensation of having fallen from a great height, after the excitement of having fought bravely to keep her place there, and of having anticipated every step of a combat still more severe which yet had not come to pass after her previsions. It had been a fight lasting for hours, from the moment Betty, all unconscious, had told her of the house in which Charlie was. That was in the morning, and now it was late afternoon, and the work of the day, the common work of the day in which all the innocent common people about had been employed, was rounding towards its end. It seemed to her a long, long time that she had

been involved, first in imagination, in severe thought, and then in actual conflict—in this struggle, fighting for her life. From the beginning she had made up her mind that she should fail. It was a consciously losing game that she had fought so gallantly, never giving in; and indeed she was not unaware, nor was she without a languid satisfaction in the fact that she had indeed carried off the honours of the field, that it would not be said that she had been beaten. But what did that matter? Argument she knew and felt had nothing to do with such affairs. She had known herself to have lost from the moment she saw Colonel Kingsward standing there against the mantelpiece in the dining-room. It had not been possible for her then to give in, to turn and go forth into the street flinging down her arms. On the contrary, it was her nature to fight to the last; and she had carried off an apparent victory. She had marched off with colours flying from the field of battle, leaving every enemy confounded. But she herself entertained no illusion in the matter. It was possible no doubt that her

spell might yet be strong enough upon her middle-aged captive to make him ignore and pass over everything that told against her—but, after considering the situation with a keen and close survey of every likelihood, she dismissed that hope. No, her chance was lost—again ; the battle was over—again. It had been so near being successful that the shock was greater perhaps than usual ; but she had now been feeling the shock for hours ; so that her actual fall was as much a relief as a pang, and her mind, full of resource, obstinately sanguine, was becoming ready to pass on to the next chance, and had already sprung up to think—What now ?

I am sorry that in this story I have always been placed in natural opposition to this woman, who was certainly a creature full of interest, full of resource, and indomitable in her way. And she had a theory of existence, as, it is my opinion, we all must have, making out to ourselves the most plausible reasons and excuses for all we do. Her struggle—in which she would not have denied that she had sometimes been unscrupulous—had always been for a standing-

ground on which, if once attained, she could have been good. She had always promised herself that she would be good when once she had attained—oh, excellent! kind, just, true!—a model woman. And what, after all, had been her methods? There had been little harm in them. Here and there somebody had been injured, as in the case of Aubrey Leigh, of Charlie Kingsward. To the first she had indeed done considerable harm, but then she had soothed the life of Amy, his little foolish wife, to whom she had been more kind than she had been unkind to him. She had not wanted to be the third person between that tiresome couple. She had stayed in his house from a kind of sense of duty, and had Aubrey Leigh indeed asked her to become his second wife she would, of course, have accepted him for the sake of the position, but with a grimace, She was not particularly sorry for having harmed him. It served him right for—well, for being Aubrey Leigh. And as for Bee Kingsward, she had triumphantly proved, much to her own surprise it must be said, that it was not she who had done Bee any

harm. Then Charlie—poor Charlie, poor boy! He thought, of course, that he was very miserable and badly used. Great heavens! that a boy should have the folly to imagine that anything could make him miserable, at twenty-two—a man, and with all the world before him. Miss Lance at this moment was not in the least sorry for Charlie. It would do him good. A young fellow who had nothing in the world to complain of, who had everything in his favour—it was good for him to be unhappy a little, to be made to remember that he was only flesh and blood after all.

Thus she came to the conclusion, as she walked along, that really she had done no harm to other people. To herself, alas! she was always doing harm, and every failure made it more and more unlikely that she would ever succeed. She did not brood over her losses when she was thus defeated. She turned to the next thing that offered with what would have been in a better cause a splendid philosophy, but yet in moments like this she felt that it became every day more improbable that she would ever succeed.

Instead of the large and liberal sphere in which she always hoped to be able to fulfil all the duties of life in an imposing and remarkable way, she would have probably to drop into—what? A governess's place, for which she would already be thought too old, some dreadful position about a school, some miserable place as house-keeper—she with all her schemes, her hopes of better things, her power over others. This prospect was always before her, and came back to her mind at moments when she was at the lowest ebb, for she had no money at all. She had always been dependent upon somebody. Even now her little campaign in George Street, Hanover Square, was at the expense of the friend with whom she had lived in Oxford, and who believed Laura was concerting measures to establish herself permanently in some remunerative occupation. These accounts would have to be settled somehow, and some other expedient be found by which to try again. Well, one thing done with, another to come on—was not that the course of life? And there was a certain relief in the thought that it was done with.

The suspense was over ; there was no longer the conflict between hope and fear, which wears out the nerves and clouds the clearness of one's mental vision. One down, another come on ! She said this to herself with a forlorn laugh in the depths of her being, yet not so very forlorn. This woman had a kind of pleasure in the new start, even when she did not know what it was to be. There are a great many things in which I avow I have the greatest sympathy with her, and find her more interesting than a great many blameless people. Poetic justice is generally in books awarded to such persons. But that is, one is aware, not always the case in life.

While Miss Lance went on quietly along the long unlovely street, with those thoughts in her mind, walking more slowly than usual, a little languid and exhausted after her struggle, but as has been said frankly and without *arriere pensee* giving up the battle as lost, and accepting her defeat—she became suddenly aware of a quick firm footstep behind, sounding fast and continuous upon the pavement. A woman like this has all her wits very sharply about her, the ears and

the sight of a savage, and an unslumbering habit of observation, or she could never carry on her career. She heard the step and instinctively noted it before her mind awoke to any sense of meaning and importance in it. Then, all at once, as it came just to that distance behind which made it apparent that this footstep was following someone who went before, it suddenly slackened without stopping, became slow when it had been fast. At this, her thoughts flew away like a mist and she became all ears, but she was too wise to turn round, to display any interest. Perhaps it might be that he was only going his own way, not intending to follow, and that he had slackened his pace unconsciously without ulterior motives when he saw her in front of him—though this Miss Lance scarcely believed.

Perhaps—I will not affirm it—she threw a little more of her real languor and weariness into her attitude and movements when she made this exciting discovery. She was, in reality, very tired. She had looked so when she left the house ; perhaps she had forgotten her great fatigue a little in the course of

her walk, but it now came back again with double force, which is not unusual in the most matter of fact circumstances. As her pace grew slower, the footstep behind became slower also, but always followed on. Miss Lance proceeded steadily, choosing the quietest streets, pausing now and then at a shop window to rest. The climax came when she reached a window which had a rail round it, upon which she leaned heavily, every line of her dress expressing, with a faculty which her garments specially possessed, an exhaustion which could scarcely go further. Then she raised her head to look what the place was. It was full of embroideries and needlework, a woman's shop, where she was sure of sympathy. She went in blindly, as if her very sight were clouded with her fatigue.

"I am very tired," she said; "I want some silk for embroidery ; but that is not my chief object. May I sit down a little? I am so very tired."

"Certainly, ma'am, certainly," cried the mistress of the shop, rushing round from behind the counter to place a chair for her

and offer a glass of water. She sat down so as to be visible from the door, but still with her back to it. The step had stopped, and there was a shadow across the window—the tall shadow of a man looking in. A smile came upon Miss Lance's face—of gratitude and thanks to the kind people—also perhaps of some internal satisfaction. But she did not act as if she were conscious of anyone waiting for her. She took the glass of water with many acknowledgments; she leant back on the chair murmuring, "Thanks, thanks," to the exhortations of the shop-woman not to hurry, to take a good rest. She did not hurry at all. Finally, she was so much better as to be able to buy her silks, and, declaring herself quite restored, to go out again into the open air.

She was met by the shadow that had been visible through the window, and which, as she knew very well, was Colonel Kingsward, stiff and embarrassed, yet with great anxiety in his face. "I feared you were ill," he said, with a little jerk, the words coming in spite of him. "I feared you were fainting."

"Oh, Colonel Kingsward, you!"

"Yes—I feared you were fainting. It is—nothing, I hope?"

"Nothing but exhaustion," she said, with a faint smile. "I was very tired, but I have rested and I am a little better now."

"Will you let me call a cab for you? You don't seem fit to walk."

"Oh, no cab, thanks! I would much rather walk—the air and the slow movement does one a little good."

She was pale, and her voice was rather faint, and every line of her dress, as I have said, was tired—tired to death—and yet not ungracefully tired.

"I cannot let you go like this alone." His voice softened every moment; they went on for a step or two together. "You had better—take my arm, at least," he said.

She took it with a little cry and a sudden clasp. "I think you are not a mere man, but an archangel of kindness and goodness," she said, with a faint laugh that broke down, and tears in her eyes.

And I think for that moment, in the extraordinary revulsion of feeling, Miss Lance almost believed what she said.

CHAPTER XIX.

WHAT more is there to say? It is better, when one is able to deal poetic justice all round, to reward the good and punish the evil. Who are the good and who are the evil? We have not to do with murderers, with breakers of the law, with enemies of God or man. If Aubrey Leigh had not been exceedingly imprudent, if Bee had not been hot-headed and passionate, there would never have been that miserable breach between them. And the Sorceress, who destroyed for a time the peace of the Kingsward family, really never at any time meant that family any real harm. She meant them indeed, to her own consciousness, all the good in the world, and to promote their welfare in every way by making them her own. And

as a matter of fact she did so, devoting herself to their welfare. She made Colonel Kingsward an excellent wife and adopted his children into her sedulous and unremitting care with a zeal which a mother could not have surpassed. Her translation from scheming poverty to abundance, and that graceful modest wealth which is almost the most beautiful of the conditions of life, was made in a way which was quite exquisite as a work of art. Nobody could ever have suspected that she had been once poor. She had all the habits of the best society. There was nowhere they could go, even into the most exalted regions, where the new Mrs. Kingsward was not distinguished. She extended the Colonel's connections and interest, and made his house popular and delightful; and she was perfect for his children. Even the county people and near neighbours, who were the most critical, acknowledged this. The little girls soon learned to adore their step-mother; the big boys admired and stood in awe of her, submitting more or less to her influence, though a little suspicious and sometimes half hostile. As for baby,

who had been in a fair way of growing up detestable and a little family tyrant, his father's new marriage was the saving of him. He scarcely knew as he grew up that the former Miss Lance was not his mother, and he was said in the family to be her idol, but a very well disciplined and well behaved idol, and the one of the boys who was likely to have the finest career.

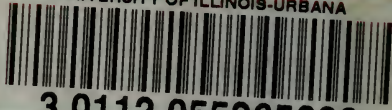
Charlie, poor Charlie, was not so fortunate, at least at first. The appointment which Colonel Kingsward declared he had been looking out for all along was got as soon as Charlie was able to accept it, and he left England when he was little more than convalescent. People said it was strange that a man with considerable influence, and in the very centre of affairs, should have sent his eldest son away to the ends of the earth, to a dangerous climate and a difficult post. But it turned out very well on the whole, for after a few years of languor and disgust with the world, there suddenly fell in Charlie's way an opportunity of showing that there was, after all, a great deal of English pluck and courage in him. I do not think it came to anything more than that—but then that,

at certain moments, has been the foundation and the saving of the British Empire in various regions of the world. There was not one of his relations who celebrated Charlie's success with so much fervour as his step-mother, who was never tired of talking of it, nor of declaring that she had always expected as much, and known what was in him. Dear Charlie, she said, had fulfilled all her expectations, and made her more glad and proud than words could say. It was a poor return for this maternal devotion, yet a melancholy fact, that Charlie turned away in disgust whenever he heard of her, and could not endure her name.

Bee, whose little troubles have been so much the subject of this story, accomplished her fate by becoming Mrs. Aubrey Leigh in the natural course of events. There was no family quarrel kept up to scandalise and amuse society, but there never was much intercourse nor any great cordiality between the houses of Kingswarden and Forest-leigh. I think, however, that it was against her father that Bee's heart revolted most.

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